

DRAMA: A POWERFUL MEDIUM FOR PRESENTING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Drama is used as very powerful medium to present social problems. In 1950s the emergence of social evil is first noticed in Marathi theatre through drama. Vijay Tendulkar, an avant- grade Indian playwright used the stage as a platform to question the discrimination system in Indian society. Creation of expressive women characters from the pen of a male writer is certainly a heartening support to the women writers who constantly engaged in proving the individuality of women.

Vijay Tendulkar, with his integrity and dexterity, won reputation and recognition in the society. And now he is referred as a great Indian playwright. Tendulkar is often termed as 'the angry young man of Marathi theatre'. He has portrayed almost all social institutions and establishments, such as family, marriage, working place, caste that he came across and tries to hold them upside down in order to reveal the oppressive nature inherent in their discursive configuration. In his *Silence! The Court is in Session* Tendulkar presents the picture of young women through the central character of the play *Miss Leela Benare*. The suffering of Leela Benare, has caught each one's attention and consequently became one of the most prominent characters of Indian Drama.

Keywords: Discrimination, Individuality, Social institutions, Indian Drama, Indian Society.

INTRODUCTION:

Drama is used as very powerful medium to present social problems. In 1950s the emergence of social evil is first noticed in Marathi theatre through drama. Vijay Tendulkar, an avant- grade Indian playwright used the stage as a platform to question the discrimination system in Indian society. Creation of expressive women characters from the pen of a male writer is certainly a heartening support to the women writers who constantly engaged in proving the individuality of women.

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Generally, Tendulkar's plays are women centered. Most of the action in his plays revolves around women problems. Tendulkar's female roles conceal those played by the men figuring in them. It is Leela Benare in *Silence!*, Sarita in *Kamala*, Rama in *The Vultures*, Jyoti in *Kanyadaan* and Lalitha Gauri in *Ghashiram Kotwal* who play the leading roles in these plays. These plays present a world apparently dominated by male chauvinists and the striking dramatic action in these plays achieve its power mainly because of the presence of these women figuring in them.

In his *Silence! The Court is in Session* Tendulkar presents the picture of young women through the central character of the play *Miss Leela Benare*. The suffering of Leela Benare, has caught each one's attention and consequently became one of the most prominent characters of Indian Drama. Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), is the first play to become a part of the New Indian Drama trend of the sixties. The title of this play in Marathi is *Shantata ! Court Chalu Aahe*. The play has

been translated into many languages and Priya Adarkar translated it in English as *Silence! The Court is in Session* in 1978. Tendulkar protests against the treatment of women in the Indian society, he shows how women are judged by the conventional parameters created in contrast to the male in every sphere of life by satirizing on the middle class hypocrisy. Benare's behaviour, which does not conform to the familiar traditional docile image of the 'Indian lady', comes under inquiry because of her assertive and aggressive tendency. She wants to live by her own terms, as an individual and not as a woman as a sexual class.

The play sets Tendulkar apart from his predecessors as he became the centre of a general controversy that which termed him as the angry young dramatist of the Marathi theatre and was identified as a rebel against the established traditional, conventional ideas and values of a fundamentally orthodox society. The play took its original form from a real life incident and Tendulkar happened to overhear from an amateur theatre group who arrives in a suburban village of Mumbai to stage a mock trial in Vile Parle, the Suburb where Tendulkar lives.

The playwright presents a bitter satire against the social evils and attempts to criticize the follies and faults prevailing in the Indian society through the character of Benare the protagonist of the play. Tendulkar brings out the dark side of human nature and finds an indirect method of removing the social evils by creating hatred into spectator's mind through this play.

According to Elaine Showalter, a woman in her inevitable struggle against the conventional man goes through three major phases.

"First there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards, and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages Feminine, Feminist, and Female."

Characterization:

Tendulkar shows brilliantly how the characters fight for authority, power and try to trap each other through a metaphorical mock-court and how men like Kashikar, Sukhatme and others gang up against the protagonist of the play Leela Benare by torturing her through a mock trial. The playwright exposes Benare's portion within the game of the mock-trial through the hypocrisy of the male dominated society and its aggression against women. An attempt is made to explore the voices of marginalized women in Vijay Tendulkar's play.

Like Tendulkar, Partha N. Mukherji points out that, the evolution of the position of women in India can be

In the sphere of structural elaboration, sex differentiation gradually but inevitably evolved in a manner such that societal roles which were linked with production, governance and ecclesiastics, became more or less, the exclusive ciornains of the male sex. Concurrently, the biological capacity of the female to reproduce the human species and ensure its survival, led to her being assigned roles which progressively tied her clown to the horn and withdrew her from the wider economic, political and religious arenas of social participation. Paralleling these two processes [...] or social prescriptions(p. 35-64)

Tendulkar places in our hands a beautiful character of Miss Benare, a dutiful and punctual school teacher who is genuinely representative of middle class family life and an innocent victim of the cultured society of intellectuals and a galaxy of characters. The mock trial of Leela Benare is ingeniously conceived and so powerfully portrayed that the effect of dramatic irony and social satire is fully achieved. She becomes a member of the amateur theatre group called 'The Sonar Moti Tenement Progressive Association' Mumbai. All the other members of this Amateur Theatre group are Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Karnik, Samant, Balu Rokde and the absent but much talked-about Professor Damle.

Raghu Samant is the local ‘innocent’ who escorts Miss Benare and rest of the members of the drama troupe, to a suburban Mumbai village hall where they are scheduled to stage a play that evening. The action of the play takes place over a single evening. The play has three acts and there is no division of scenes. The play deals with a cross section of around ten characters from the middle class who have assembled together for staging a mock-trail. In order to highlight the hypocrisy hidden in the cross-section of the metropolitan Bombay middle class, Tendulkar brings them all together under the banner of an amateur theatre called ‘Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association’.

The light hearted humour of different characters prepares the atmosphere of picnic like presentation. There is a prolonged discussion among the characters regarding the equipments and arrangements that are needed during the performance. In order to lighten the atmosphere, Miss Benare tries to distract them by telling them of her childhood and school days when she would put “fresh nice cover” on every book she had and writes, in beautiful tiny letters, with pictures of flowers and things.

All the other characters entry on the stage and they prepare for the mock-trial in a village in order to educate the rural folk. The Amateur Drama troupe has plenty of time to kill before the performance so they decides to spend time in some sort of game activity and also to show Samant, how the proceedings of the court starts the group decides to act a new mock-trail other than the one to be staged. In the mock-trail or court, the most important person is easily the accused. Benare, the person acting wise will have the maximum exposure and time. In this game all the other characters attack Benare a young women of thirty-four becomes a victim to conventions and shameful hypocrisy of the middle class male dominated society and also the deplorable legal system found in contemporary society as she attains a greater level of confidence.

The characters go back to a changed context and situation. Benare becomes the teacher and other performers become children. Ms. Benare is attacked for no fault of her own and as it hints to her personal tragedy, she collapses; but the impact of her free self-declaration haunts the readers throughout. Her monologue at the end is reminiscent of Nora Helmer’s declaration of independence in Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*; however it lacks the final vigor of protest.

The Role of Women in different Periods:

It is true that during the Vedic period women were honored. There was no discrimination between men and women in matters of education and religious rites. But the protagonist Ms. Benare is like a free bird, who expresses her desire to Samant ‘Let’s leave everyone behind, I thought and go somewhere far, far away-with you’ and expresses her liking towards him ‘Yes, I like you very much’.. The confusion and nervousness of Samant makes Miss Benare to change the subject of marriage to professional life. She tells her commitment and honesty as a school teacher and how she is punctual in reaching the school where she teaches every day.

Women certainly occupied an important position in pre-Vedic ancient Indian society. In fact, it has even been suggested that in many respects, her position was superior to men. The evidence from the ancient epics also pays tribute to the power or "Shakti" of the Indian woman. Vijay Tendulkar shows the fact that we are living in the world of democracy but about half of the population of the world are not given their common rights to lead a smooth life. It is therefore extremely ironic to note how over the ages, the position of women in Indian society has degenerated to the extent that today, women continue to struggle for their rightful position and due in society.

Women Leaders in the Society:

Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu were two of the first leaders who argued that female roles - mother, wife, and homemaker - were important. They stated that debilitating social practices should be abolished and that women should be educated. Benare, an innocent school teacher holds the deep faith in human goodness. Consequently she easily turns into a helpless victim of the dignified mask of the society. All the other characters try to needle Benare but at least in the First half of the play she is able to out-smart them. At the mention of Prof.Damle’s name, the absentee character, that Benare “falls silent

and motionless and goes by mistake to Ponkshe and stands talking to him, with an artificial air". Her response to all the characters is also a little exaggerated. It is interesting to note here that what Tendulkar has presented is about the misconduct and misdeeds are faced by the women of the contemporary society that is very much near to the day-to-day occurrences and instances which we see in our newspapers.

It is interesting to note that so far as the feminine sensibility is concerned Mahesh Dattani's plays specially his *Tara* is worth noticing. Through some dramatic techniques Dattani tries his best to explore the various aspects of the miserable life of a woman, brought up on the lap of male-dominating society. In this respect *Tara* may be compared to Vijay Tendulkar's well-known play '*Silence: The Court is in Session*' which lays much stress on plight and persecution of a deserted woman struggling for her individual existence and identity. *Tara* by Mahesh Dattani is based on the Post Modern Criticism in which writers are paying their attention much on the cause of the deserted and down-trodden including the women. The position of women in our country, in spite of our best effort, made by constitution for the improvement of the plight of women, most of the women especially living in the remote villages are bearing the brunt of patriarchal domination everywhere.

As Sangeeta Das evaluates on Dattani's writing as:

"Considering his foresight, it can be said that young playwright like Dattani, having guts to bring forth such poignant issues and present them threadbare, should be spawned and encouraged."(p.51)

Problems faced by Women:

"More often than not, only women have to bear the brunt of shame. Since time immemorial, shame in the form of moral sanction has been an effective tool that the patriarchal society uses to control women, to limit their autonomy, their mobility and their choices".

Through the idea of mock trial, Tendulkar shows that how the other fellow actors who get even with Benare for her sarcastic remarks about them, united and decided to make Benare the accused in the mock-trail here the playwright creates the mockery of the law court and also the mockery of the double standards of society. But Benare's criticism and undermining of the rest of the characters, in some way or the other, is underpinned by her superiority complex. What Benare does not perceive is that, she can never attain the dominant position, being a member of the second sex in the society. The protagonist Benare is a truly honest and significantly transparent being locked up in a room, all the characters, with their respective characteristics and Benare with her urge to live freely, represent the society in the microcosm. In the name of a game, all the characters suck the sap of Benare's soul by levying against her the charge of infanticide. The drama troupe gang up against Benare and exploit the opportunity of the mock trial to dissect Benare's private life and humiliate her in the name of game. So, the accusation of infanticide makes Benare troubled. She is not granted any opportunity to counter this accusation as the text suggests, when the wooden dock is placed around her, she does not enter that willingly: 'Karnik and Rokde silently bring the wooden dock and arrange it around her. This indicates that women do not actually have freedom of will or action and, if necessary, society can even force them to accept these unwritten laws. Benare undergoes deep mental agony when she is betrayed by the other members of the group. The mock trial holds a mirror to our social response. This indicates the miseries faced by women in this world. To raise the problems of women many authors have contributed through various genres—poetry, novel, drama, essay, article etc.

Once the trial begins, there is no shelter for poor Benare. Her private life is exposed and publicly dissected, revealing her illicit love affair with Prof.Damle, a married man who possesses a family, which has resulted in her pregnancy. Prof.Damle is significantly absent at the trial, denoting his total withdrawal of responsibility – either social or moral. The accused Miss Benare does not like to be accused of 'infanticide'. Her request for changing the charge of infanticide to 'Snatching' is ruled out. The personal enquiries give rise to the burdensome existence of Benare in the cultured society. The baseless

charges against Benare are not based on the actual fact. However, Vijay Tendular's play a critique of patriarchal values and institutions that presents how the judicial system operates as an instrument in silencing the voice of Indian women.

It is to be noted that women have been the subject of great mystery and controversy in our history and traditions, myths and legends. She is allegedly charged with so many drawbacks mostly imaginary. Tendulkar exposes the double standards of our society which deals with examination of witness; they are Ponkshe, Karnik, Rokde, and Samant. Tendulkar has created a satire on the unjust –male dominating society and on the working of the court. Simon de Beauvoir calls this the “erotic fate” of the woman in her celebrated *The Second Sex*. Therefore the punishment falls on Benare for an act which is accomplished by two. Lawyer cross-examines, Miss Benare but she maintains silence. Miss Benare faints when one witness expose that the accused always keeps a bottle TIK-20 in her pocket because of disappointment in love with her own maternal uncle and attempted suicide and everyone exclaimed “What an immoral relationship”. Ponkshe, Karnik, and Kashikar expose certain incidents about the poignant events in Benare's life which crosses the boundaries of reasonable argument and propriety. Benare's silence is quickly translated as disapproval of court.

However, as the act proceeds, Benare becomes tense and agitated. As the questions become more intimidating and shrill, Benare protest that her private life cannot be discussed in a mock-trail. Thus, Benare loses control of her temper and states that, the society has no right to interfere in her personal life. But everyone in the mock-trail becomes inquisitive to reveal the identity of Benare. Here Tendulkar points that Benare's tragedy discloses the fact that even in the most complicated, civilized section of the society, women are born to suffer in the hands of the evil tendencies that have taken roots in the so-called modern, cultured society. Tendulkar has become an important spokesperson for the downtrodden, weak and exploited masses, including the women. Though he does not call himself a feminist, many of his plays present the position of women in the contemporary modern society.

Tendulkar here focuses on the hypocritical double standard of the so-called civilized urban middle class society. The eyes of all the members of the court are like eager predators focused at Miss Benare and she becomes helpless like an ensnared animal. Benare realizes that the mock trial has become a serious trial in real life. When she goes to the inner room, all the other members discusses the possibility of Benare's pregnancy as a result of her affair with Prof. Damle. Benare gradually starts to realize that she has become the real target of their blood thirsty game. When Benare returns to pick up her bag and purse and tries to go away from the room, unfortunately the door gets stuck and she unable to open it. The locked door becomes symbolic of the absence of escape routes for Benare. Benare's unwillingness to continue with the play, she is forced to continue with it.

CONCLUSION:

Tendulkar's purpose in the play *Silence!* The Court is in Session is to attack the patriarchal values and institutions and he also tries to show how the judicial system operates as an instrument in silencing the voice of women. Tendulkar as a social reformer has used satire as a weapon to change the society to his own point of view. The playwright shows one social evil after another in his play. Vijay Tendulkar again and again mentions society and social customs by his characters. Initially, when Benare narrates her life in the school with children, she transforms the empty scenic space of the proscenium stage into a school situation. Benare's acting changes the dialogic narration into live performance and with that the empty space transforms into a new mimetic space.

Tendulkar presents this mock-trial concept to represent the subjugation of the women that is always present in our society since ages. The play is widely appreciated for its technical experiments, textual compactness, sharp dialogue, skilful art of characterization and brilliant plot construction. The use of irony and satire and the symbols such as the green cloth parrot and the locked door certainly enhance the dramatic effect. On the whole, Tendulkar's is considered as an artistic and creative treasure in the realm of Indian Drama in English and the characters of his plays give a unique position to him as a major Indian English playwright.

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