

Woman As A Scapegoat In Vijay Tendulkar's Silence! The Court Is In Session

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Abstract - The late Vijay Tendulkar is one of the most controversial yet the most popular dramatist in the contemporary Indian English Drama. His writings often display how women are victimized, exploited and tortured even today. Women during the Vedic ages were treated at par with men. They enjoyed all the rights without any discrimination but today their condition is highly pathetic. Their existence is questioned in womb. Physical exploitation and mental harassment have become everyday affairs now-a-days. All such unpalatable and shameful issues are widely discussed by Tendulkar in his various remarkable plays. Present paper tends to display how woman is used as a scapegoat in the light of his first play **Silence! The court is in session**. This play delves deep into the realities of life in the contemporary society. At one place he states, "As a social being, I am against all exploitations and I passionately feel that all exploitation must come to an end ..." The paper highlights how the hypocrisy of the society tortures a woman physically, mentally and emotionally.

Key words - Exploitation, violence, scapegoat, victimized.

Introduction - Vijay Tendulkar is one of the most controversial yet the most popular dramatist in the contemporary Indian English Drama. Dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani and many more deserve due appreciation for the revival of the tradition of Indian Drama in English. They have made drama a typical art form, epitomizing the socio-political, economic and realistic image of Indian art, culture and values. Through the writings of these writers Indian English Drama has depicted the new light of humanism and realism against the philosophical creed of earlier writers like Tagore, Sri Aurobindo etc.

Vijay Tendulkar is a leading contemporary Indian playwright, screen and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist, and above all a social commentator. For the past four decades he has been the most influential dramatist and theatre personality. A resident of the city of Mumbai, Tendulkar (1928-2008) is the author of thirty full-length plays and twenty-three one act plays, several of which have become classics of modern Indian theatre. One of the Hercules Pillars of contemporary Indian English drama, Tendulkar represents the issues which are temporal and timeless. V.S. Naipaul considers him as India's best playwright. Arundhati Banerjee introduces Vijay Tendulkar thus, "Vijay Tendulkar has been in the vanguard of not just Marathi but of Indian theatre almost for forty years." He portrays the themes of isolation and alienation of an individual, and his perpetual struggle with the hostile surroundings. Tendulkar has won name and fame through his plays such as *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *The Vultures*, *Sakharam Binder* and *Ghashiram Kotwal*. Though his plays are sometimes criticized for excessive use of sex and violence, they are basically a part of modern man's anguish. He has created awareness among the masses about some of the basic problems of life.

As a keen observer of Indian society, he experimented

with the less spoken issues. He never sheds away from saying unpalatable truths and shows the way people prefer to live. He describes hypocrisy, violence, lust for power and corruption as bare facts of modern life. He depicts how women are tortured, victimized and exploited. An attempt has been made to discuss the various factors responsible for the unfair treatment given to Miss Banare, the female protagonist, of this play and how she is compelled to tolerate physical, mental and emotional violence in the play.

Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe (*Silence! The Court is in Session*, 1967) was his first play in which he marked out to be a rebel against the established values of the society. With its translation in Hindi, he came to be regarded with Mohan, Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad. This play combines social criticism with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society. The oppression and mental trauma of a woman has been articulated skillfully in this play. Though he cannot be branded as a "feminist" yet he effectively interrogates the patriarchal concept of a woman as an inferior being in the society. *Silence!* represents the dilemma of a young woman who is betrayed twice by her male counterparts. When hardly of fourteen years, she is robbed off her virginity by her own maternal uncle and later ditched by Prof. Damle also. It exposes insincerity of the society that excuses men but not women for the same kind of offence. In her essay, "On Gender and Power", Urvashi Barat, a literary critic, comments very aptly on power politics which is the main cause of female subjugation in the society: The most obvious and persistent theme in the plays of Tendulkar is 'power', its effect on people and their relationship with each other, and the way it dehumanizes and brutalizes those who live in it. Power politics, the battle for supremacy in society and inhuman relationships are demons treated in his work through gender. The role of gender in power game is unveiled in plays like *Silence!*

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The Court is in Session and Kamala, and Ghasiram Kotwal, which focus directly on the status of women in a patriarchal society. These plays suggest how gender & power are inter-linked in society. (Critical Perspectives: Ghasiram Kotwal, 85)

Leela Benare, the central character of the play, dares to ignore the social taboos and lives an independent life according to her free will. "My life is my own, I haven't sold it to anyone for a job." She is projected as a rebel against the established norms of typical Indian society. A teacher by profession, she is self-dependent, carefree and empowered whereas all the male characters suffer from sadism and an inferiority complex as they have failed in their ways of life. They feel insecure and lack in confidence. These specific traits of male characters make Benare, a superior character. Mr. Kashikar is known for his pretention of social upliftment. Sukhatme is a lawyer who "Just sits alone in the barrister's room at court, swatting flies with legal Precedent!" Ponshe fails twice in his effort of passing Inter Science Examination. Karnik is a complete failure as an actor. Prof. Damle is an escapist. Mrs. Kashikar is a total dependent on her husband and lacks in average I.Q. The only exception to all these character is Ms. Leela Benare. Despite being a woman, she is the only one who earns her livelihood by herself. The hypocrisy of the society, specially of the male-dominance, is exposed when they fail to accept her as a successful women among them. Consequently, most of the characters are often waiting for some or other opportunity for encashing the situation to humiliate Ms. Benare. The play is, in fact, a satire on the hypocrisy of the middle class society. The playwright himself points out: "...their characters, dialogues, gestures and even mannerisms reflect their petty circumscribed existence fraught with frustration and repressed desire that find expression in their malicious and spiteful attitude towards their fellow being." (Preface VIII)

To cover up their frustration, they perpetuate violence against her. They plan a 'Mock-law-court' as a rehearsal for evening performance. All the male characters take the position of legal officers and make Benare the scape-goat, a victim. All of them, in search of a proper opportunity conspire against her. The charge of infanticide is put against the spinster, Leela Banere who got pregnant once in her early life. This case is set to be examined in a court. It is through this mock-trial that her private life is exposed publically establishing her as a woman of loose character. She is tortured to such an extent that no distinction lies between a fictitious case and her real life. Gradually, the mock trial begins to assume sinister form. Benare, who is earlier taking it just as a sport, gradually realizes that she is being trapped and targeted. What is started as an entertaining game now has turned into a hunting game. Arundhati Banerjee maintains, "... the accusation brought against Benare at the beginning of the trial turns into the verdict at the end because contemporary Indian society, with its roots firmly grounded in reactionary world cannot allow the birth of a child out of wedlock." The climax of her torture is seen when she finds the door of the hall locked from outside & she is unable to leave these hungry vultures. Escape is denied to her. Her own gender, Mrs. Kashikar

also assaults her by dragging her to the witness box. When Kashikar, playing the role of a Judge, listens that Benare is a spinster, he goes to the extent of approving the custom of child marriage and pulls her forcefully back to the witness box. Unable to bear so much of torture, she tries to drink poison TIK 20 but is prevented to do so. She gets totally devastated and depressed.

When observed minutely, we notice that women characters of Vijay Tendulkar are strong fighters against such cultural and social forces that challenge the individuality of a woman. In *Silence!* Benare is presented as a bold and daring protagonist who instead of breaking, collects mental courage, stands erect and speaks in self-defense. She speaks powerfully from the heart and protects herself well. "Yes, I have a lot to say. For so many years. I haven't said a word. Chances came, and chances went. Storms raged one after another about my throat. And there was a wail like death in my heart. But each time I shut my lips tight..." (p.72)

She comes down heavily on men conspiring against her: "These are the mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See their faces- how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires." (74) This is the heart of a woman who is often targeted by the society, which fails to understand her inner feelings as a human being with normal biological urges. Benare is indeed the voice of so many suffering women of the society, whose molestation is done inside the family by any of the family members and thus they are tortured not only physically but also mentally and psychologically. Life becomes meaningless and loses all the attractions for these innocent but victimized women. The deep pain and agony of Benare's heart can be understood easily in her following statements: "Life is a poisonous snake that bites itself. Life is a betrayal, life is a fraud. Life is a drug. Life is drudgery...Life is a dreadful thing..." (p. 75) And then they have to fight a lot for their existence in the society. P. Obula Reddy and P. Pramila Devi appreciate Benare by calling her a 'new woman':

Benare, the principal character in the play is as sprightly rebellious and assertive as the heroine of Shakespeare romantic comedies...Of course, Benare is a lovely spark from the thunder bolt of Tendulkar. She is a new woman pleading for freedom from the social norms.

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