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Silence in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence!* *The Court is in Session:* A Socio-Feminist Reading

NADIA SHAH

ABSTRACT

Social documents, historical narratives and of course creative literature has witnessed a barrage of documentation regarding patriarchy and female oppression. The problem defies socio-ethnic boundaries and is least dependent on socio-political and financial strength and stability of a region. Most of it has generated a reaction in the form of pro-women's rights writing broadly classified as feminism or feminist theory both from male as well as female writers which again is sourced on a global scale with takers throughout the globe. In the domain of feminist writing that constitute writings by women and also those on women, use of silence plays a very strategic role in highlighting the acute sufferings and oppression of women. Again, the use of silence is a common thread in most of the feminist writings. Ironically, some have seen silence as the loudest way of narrativising feminism. The present paper is an analysis of Vijay Tendulkar's use of silence as an effective means of articulating the male supremacy and the resultant women's oppression rampant in the Indian society. His play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* explores 'silence' as the regulatory and mandatory silence of court proceedings on surface level but also suggests the silence of men as well as women in the face of female oppression. This paper tries to analyse the play as a simultaneous promotion and campaigning of women's rights and their limitations vis a vis moral and ethical norms in general and Indian social reality and adaptability in particular.

Keywords: Feminism, Silence, Socio-feminism, oppression, patriarchy.

History testifies to the fact that women have always been the victims of male supremacy, social oppression and political persecution. In response, feminists from time to time have campaigned, both theoretically as well as on a fictional forum, for the social and political privileges of the women. Originally it started in the 18th century primarily as a social movement for the emancipation of women in general in the West. Later on, feminism emerged as a full-fledged ideological movement that incorporates under its gamut combating gender stereotypes. Additionally, it continuously aims at prompting and promoting educational and professional opportunities for women at par with men. From seeking the right to education and right to vote, feminists throughout the world have been championing vehemently for equal property and marital rights. In the different parts of the world today, feminism seems to have evolved with varied causes and goals depending upon the history of the place, its cultural make-up and some other relevant factors.

Feminists in India, corresponding to their counterparts in the rest of the world, subscribe to the general feminist ideology of seeking gender equality. However, what characterises and simultaneously distinguishes Indian feminists from the rest is how they have theorised it depending upon the culture-specific issues they have been trying to defy and confront within the Indian patriarchal set up. From inheritance and property laws to what they adjudge as the most absurd and inhuman marital practice of widow immolation known as *sati*, contemporary feminists in India are focusing on the other burning issues like sexual exploitation at workplaces, male supremacy, birth control, land ownership, gender pay gap, forced marriages, love *ji*had, rigid clothing regulations and other such concerns. However, Indian society never seems to have completely outgrown its woman-bashing inclination. Therefore, feminism in India today is fighting the same old problem of treating the woman as the 'other.' Apparently, Indian society looks emancipated but in

principal there has been a little progress in bringing about some substantial change on the ground.

Though different governments from time to time have come up with numbers and reports that seem to have brought about a huge change in the plight of Indian women but on an ideological level, usually captured by the literature of the country, the society in general and the average Indian male or a female retains its grudges and hostility to anything that works for a women-centric positive substantial change. So far, many Indian writers, notwithstanding the gender, with obvious or otherwise feminist undertones to their work have made significant contributions to voicing the problems of women in Indian social set up vis-a-vis marginalisation through institutions of religion in particular and culture in general. Mary Wollstonecraft's demand that "who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him of the gift of reason?" (17) in her monumental work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* falls completely in place in the face of the basic feminist agenda of questioning male supremacy and patriarchy.

Women's writings and writings about women resonate with silence both as a formal and technical manoeuvre and an essential part of the content or plot. In either of the cases, silence becomes a strong form of protest. In "Still the Silence: Feminist Reflections at the Edges of Sound," Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra explain the Western feminist tradition in terms of an equation between silence and voice, that "locates silence as a site of reform and privileges voice as the ultimate goal of and means to achieve empowerment." (1) Vijay Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, coincidentally derives its title in part from the word 'silence' which is though used as the regulatory and mandatory silence of court proceedings on surface level but also suggests the silence of men as well as women in the face of female oppression. Moreover, the silence is also exhibited in the

victim's failure to speak for herself and own responsibility for her choices and decisions.

It was originally written in Marathi with the title, *Shantata! Court Chale Ale*. It was staged for the first time in 1967, and has been translated into several languages and adapted by various theatre troupes over the years. It can be considered as a drama that resonates with powerful feminist concerns but at the same time, the play offers an in-depth commentary on the Indian social set up thereby unsettling the audience as well as the reader with regard to the established social norms and the feminist theories questioning them. Further, *Silence* is a simultaneous promotion and campaigning of women's rights and their limitations vis-a-vis moral and ethical norms in general and Indian social reality and adaptability in particular. Though Tendulkar never claimed to be a feminist yet he treats his women characters with compassion while simultaneously pitting them against hypocritical and selfish men who come across as self-appointed moral police. Further, Tendulkar puts across objectively an extremist view on women's freedom and repercussions of extreme freedom.

The play echoes images of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre as well that aims at splitting the emotional identification of the spectator with the characters or action before him – or her. Instead, the play, in order to take the spectator out and away from the complacency achieved through emotional identification, provokes rational self-reflection and a constant critical examination of the action going on the stage. Vijay Tendulkar, like Brecht through *Silence*, enables the audience to first, identify social injustice and then think of doing something substantial about it. Tendulkar innovates over Brecht by questioning ideas like liberation, justice and social reform which apparently appear revolutionary and reformative in spirit.

Silence! The Court is in Session centers on a woman protagonist, Leela Benare as the victim of social obligations as

well as of her own free and liberal spirit as a woman. She represents the quintessential modern Indian emancipated woman but simultaneously she comes across as the victim of the same temper that liberates her otherwise from the social dictates and bondage. Having a natural lust for life, Leela becomes an easy meat for a very mean game that her co-actors play with her. Having got an inkling about her private life from hearsay, they take turns in exposing and dismembering her private life publicly. During the course of the 'game' which appears like a mock trial of the play to be staged later in the day, it is revealed that Leela Benare at the age of fifteen was involved in an Oedipal/ incestuous relationship with her maternal uncle and at present was carrying an illicit affair with Professor Damle, a married man with children. Besides, it is also revealed that she is carrying Professor Damle's child and has been constantly wooing few of her co-actors to marry her in order to save herself from the shame of adultery. The 'sin' of adultery earns her the tag of promiscuity and costs her expulsion from the job of a high school teacher.

In *Silence*, almost all the male characters are shown to be hostile towards the heroine. They are ambitious, wild, brutal, selfish, mischievous and treacherous. Ironically, however, the sweeping impression that one gets from the play is that these vices come to men naturally and therefore exonerates them from any guilt committed out of them. On the other hand, women are bulldosed with moral earnestness and treated with hot iron rods for even a little aberration on their part. With reference to this, the character of Mr. Kashikar is very significant. In the mock trial, he plays the role of the judge but being essentially a man, he can't stop himself from testifying against Miss Benare. Therefore, he breaks free from the court-conduct and joins the league of other male actors to domineer the woman victim. Expecting justice and fair judgement from a person like him becomes highly suspicious. Further, Samant, seemingly, a stranger to the whole group of actors and especially the heroine

becomes the mouth piece of the general society that could invent any story in order to fuel the general narratives concerning women.

The absence of Professor Damle from the trial speaks volumes about his refusal to own Leela Benare and his child with her but at the same time it also reflects his social irresponsibility and his casual attitude towards his other duties as an actor and as a man. The fact that Mr. Damle is sought only once in the play and that too in the capacity of a witness who has to testify against Miss Benare is indicative of the hypocrisy, partiality and inequality that Indian society is characterised by especially in terms of its treatment of the two genders. The hypocrisy is also demonstrated in the ironic twist of the accusation of infanticide that Leela Benare is charged with initially as the mock trial opens. That is, towards the end of the trial and that of the play, the 'logical' conclusion to the events that unfold surprisingly during the course of the play comes in the form of the verdict that impressed upon Miss Benare to abort the unborn illegitimate child.

The character of Mrs. Kashikar is very significant because she represents the average Indian woman who has assimilated the patriarchal narrative and is complacent with male dominance on the one hand and female bashing on the other. Tendulkar has put in her persona a homogenous blend of meanness and suffering. In fact, she shares the equal burden and responsibility of 'exposing' Miss Benare and condemning her free spirit and zest for life. Mrs. Kashikar feels outraged at Miss Benare's refusal to fit in the image of an ideal woman who is supposed to have been married with children at the age of thirty. It is not clear whether she envies her freedom or she actually thinks it right for a woman to be subdued and dominated by her male counterpart in the form of a husband, father or a brother. She misses no opportunity to stain and stone her and facilitate her isolation.

In contrast, Leela Benare unequivocally sets the terms by which she lives her life. She celebrates pleasures of body and flesh and refuses to be ashamed of being sexually vivacious.

“We should laugh, we should play. We should sing, if we can and if they’ll let us, we should dance too. Shouldn’t have any false modesty or dignity. Or care for anyone! I mean it, when your life’s over, do you think anyone will give you a bit of theirs?” (Karnad 8)

On the professional level also, she comes across as dutiful, punctual and very able school teacher who is very popular among her pupils. Additionally, she is a part of a theatre group. Like other assignments, she takes her role very seriously reflected in her arrival in the hall before everyone else. Leela disregards social and moral sanctions on life and Vijay Tendulkar uses the image of the bolt impressively to stress the antagonism between the social codes and discipline and Miss Benare’s free spirit. The friction between the two, however, causes the later to bleed her finger yet she refuses to take any ‘lesson.’ Further, as Samant would repeatedly stress on the bolt being defective, that is, once the bolt causes the door to close from inside, it refuses to open, that is, once a person surrenders to social bondage, he or she becomes its slave forever.

To put it concisely, Miss Benare is the representative modern woman who lives by her own terms and is completely unmindful of social norms and regulations. She may come across as the victim of patriarchy and male chauvinism but not without some reservations. Apparently, a prototypical feminist heroine, her real life conduct is questionable not only on socio-ethical but also on moral grounds. For example, both adultery as well as incest is unacceptable to any or every culture and society. Though the way her co-actors expose her private ‘performance’ earns her some sympathy yet the performance as such is beyond moral and social acceptance. In this connection, the conclusive remarks of Sukhatme of the mock trial are significant wherein he puts across the dangers of absolute freedom.

In the play, Tendulkar's brand of feminism becomes complex with these questions in mind. He places freedom that feminism campaigns for within the practical social realities. His heroine is tragic but her tragedy results due to both, her own moral conduct as well the position of society towards her. *Silence* is a play that reverberates with questions that will never become outdated. Besides, being an open ended play, it will continue to flame social and moral issues that it raises.

The silence in *Silence* articulates the social drama with gripping details. Leela Benare's soliloquy in the third act that could be categorised as acute silence and the lawyer's conclusive details on the court proceedings put forth two divergent voices regarding freedom of women. The audience ultimately becomes the jury, although it becomes a challenging job to even come close to formulating any judgement. It wouldn't be out of place to conclude with the following remark by Jane L. Parpart and Swati Parashar:

"... voice is not democratically available to all, and it is all too easy, from a position of privilege, to 'speak for' or to fall into ventriloquising the silence of others, and thereby actively silencing them.... To read silence as 'silenced' positions the silent as passive, which recreates the hierarchies of power that respecting silence was supposed to challenge." (Parpart and Parashar i)

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