

Perspectives on Gynocentrism and the Urban Middle Class in *Silence! The Court Is In Session*

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an abstract

This article seeks to explore how Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is In Session*, a landmark in modern Indian dramaturgy, zeroes in on Gynocentrism and at the same time takes on the contemporary urban middle class. Patriarchy demands that a man shall be free, adventurous and daring one and woman a meek one, trafficking in the trodden path of conventionality and coursed in the reigning patriarchal ideology. Society takes serious offence in Benare's free and frank behaviour. Patriarchy tries to keep up its prerogatives in every step. In the name of mock-trial each and every member of the society needles Benare. The innocuous latch that shuts Benare at the end of second act is symbolic of this social convention which traps her. It is not that they direct their shafts to Benare alone. Each and every one lashes the whip against the other. The violence of the troupe to which Benare has been subjected is a result of their own failure and helplessness in life. The sadistic behavior towards Benare gives these failed personalities immense pleasure. Professional failure in the case of Sukhatme, Karnik and Ponkshe and marital failure in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar make them ruthless towards Benare. The inner consciousness about their own failure makes them torture Benare. The play lets loose the innate savagery of the urban middle class. *Silence* is a powerful dramatic statement of the violence that humans are capable of when actuated by envy, lust and revenge.

Keywords: Modern Indian Dramaturgy, Vijay Tendulkar, *Silence! The Court Is In Session*, Gynocentrism, Urban Middle Class.

Vijay Tendulkar, one of the most turbulent and controversial modern Indian playwrights, won the highest award in the field of dramatics for his *Shantata! Court Chaloo Aache* (*Silence! The Court Is In Session*). *Silence* won him national fame and *Ghasiram Kotwal* launched him into the global theatre firmament. And it is not for nothing that Tendulkar's name is uttered simultaneously with Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad and Mohan Rakesh. If *Sakharam Binder* exposes the impotent fury of a male masochist, *The Vultures* (*Gidhade*) exhibits the domestic violence arising from drunkenness, greed and immorality and

Ghasiram Kotwal is a dramatic exposure of the latent violence, treachery, sexuality, and immorality that characterize contemporary politics, in *Silence*, Tendulkar is concerned with the machination of power. Both *Silence* and *Kamala* by Tendulkar are gynocentric. Though Tendulkar is not a self-acknowledged feminist, he portrays his female characters from a point of view that may be called feministic. In such works, “feministic ideology which pits women in direct encounter with chauvinistic male oppressors, finds its full and free expression” (Dharan 49). *Silence* portrays how a devoted lady teacher who has given the last drop of her blood in teaching, is trapped and coerced into making a confession about her love-affair.

Patriarchy demands that a man shall be free, adventurous and daring one and woman a meek one, trafficking in the trodden path of conventionality and coursed in the reigning patriarchal ideology. Society takes serious offence in Benare’s free and frank behaviour. Patriarchy tries to keep up its prerogatives in every step. In the name of mock-trial each and every member of the society needles Benare. The innocuous latch that shuts Benare at the end of Second Act is symbolic of this social convention which traps her. Motherhood is sanctified. There is no doubt about it. But the stamp of matrimony should not be a ‘must’ in Motherhood. Moreover, a woman’s femininity is denied. Sukhatme says, “Woman is a wife for a moment, but a mother forever” (Tendulkar 31). One’s personal life has nothing to do with his/her professional life. Yet Benare is punished. What is most tragic is that whereas Benare is going to be punished, the man who is equally responsible for this deed escapes scot-free though it is he who has broken the sacred bond of wedlock. Law in patriarchy is used as an instrument to enforce its ideologies and it does its best to silence women’s voices. Benare in her last monologue says, she has “shut her lips” (Tendulkar 72) tight though storms raged one after another. Benare is equated with criminals and sinners. One is immediately reminded of Ammu in *God of Small Things*. In the beginning, Benare’s eagerness to come closer to Samant, her curiosity about his personal life, seems queer. Only after finishing the drama we come to know it is the false social morality which forces Benare to “run after men” (Tendulkar 33) to seek a man who is prepared to “take a broad view of things for the sake of humanity and accept the child along with the mother” (Tendulkar 60) – for she wants to bring up that “tender little bud” (Tendulkar 75). But the males refuse to father her child – those who preach the sanctity of motherhood show absolutely no compunction in asking Benare to destroy the foetus in her womb. This very attitude of the urban middle class opens up another field of interest in Tendulkar’s dramas, namely, his deft handling of the middle class.

General readers’ opinion is that ‘raw violence’ reverberates through the plays of Vijay Tendulkar. However, unlike *Vultures* and *Sakharam*, *Silence* is free from any such raw violence. *Silence*, like Tendulkar’s *Kamala*, is a satirical play that directs its barbs mainly against the urban middle class. Tendulkar’s plays are sharply divided into two distinct groups, namely, pre-*Silence* plays and post-*Silence* plays. We see the triumphant return of the

raw brutality and lewdness of *Gidhade* in the post-*Shantata* phase, particularly in *Sakharam Binder*. In the words of Kumud Mehta, “in his earlier works he had dwelt on the woes of the middle-class with a degree of sympathy, bordering on sentiment” (iii). In *Silence* we perceive a change. The play is itself a satire on the conventions and hypocrisy of the middle-class, male-oriented society which maintains a farcical moral code. The ugliness that he detected in the psyche of his subjects, he reveals here. To highlight the hypocrisy latent in the microscopic cross-section of the milieu of the metropolitan Bombay middle class, Tendulkar brings all the characters under the banner of an amateur theatre – the ‘Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association.’ It is Benare’s ironic perception about her colleagues which gives the audience an insight into other characters. Her description of her colleagues is punctuated with shrewdness and sarcasm. Mr. Kashikar is described as, “Mr. Prime objective” (Tendulkar 6) and Mrs. Kashikar is “Mrs. Hand – that – Rocks – the – Cradle” (Tendulkar 6). “Mr. Prime objective is tied up with uplifting the masses. And poor Hand – that – Rocks – the – Cradle has no cradle to rock” (Tendulkar 6). Sukhatme is an expert on the law who is “such an authority on the subject, even a desperate client won’t go anywhere near him! (Tendulkar 6) and he “just sits alone in the barristers’ room at court swatting flies with legal precedents!” (Tendulkar 6). Ponshe is referred to as the “inter-failed scientist” (Tendulkar 6) and Prof. Damle is an intellectual who prides himself on his book learning but when there’s a real-life problem, “away he runs! hides his head” (Tendulkar 6). As we probe into the text, we come to know that Kashikars have adopted Balu Rokde not out of generosity but out of their need – in order that nothing should happen to either of them in their bare house and that they should not die of boredom. Kashikar, the social reformer has no scruple about making Rokde a slave. However, not only Kashikars, even Karnik tries to humiliate Rokde when he wants to play the role of the absent fourth witness. Tendulkar’s mastery is evident in the opening scene which he turns into a marvellous piece of satire. Benare subjects the amateurs to merciless physical dissection in order to expose their real seamy inner-self. False display of conjugal harmony is not spread from the satirical barb of Tendulkar. Mr. Kashikar tries to exhibit love for his wife by buying garlands and Mrs. Kashikar buys bush-shirt for her husband. Mr. Kashikar’s constant snubbing of his wife falsifies their attempt to pose as pigeon-pair. Even Karnik criticizes this practice and taunts the falsity of emotion: “When I for one see such public formalities between husband and wife, I suspect something quite different in private” (Tendulkar 12).

Like the opening scene, the mock-trial, the ‘play-within-the-play’ also offers ample scope to dissect and lay bare the dormant ills in the psyche of the urban hypocrites. The urban middle class, with its sham morality cannot tolerate Benare’s strident independent ways. So she is the general butt to whom all direct their shafts. The self-consciously independent, vehemently assertive and immensely cheerful Benare is pitted against the utterly selfish, hypocritical and malicious amateur artists.

To idle away the drowsy afternoon and to give Samant, one of the replacements, some practice in the intricacies of the court procedure, Mrs. Kashikar suggests to have a rehearsal with him. However, it is Benare who urges them to change the topic since it is worn out (“Tonight’s the eighth time”) (Tendulkar 19). Sukhatme, the ‘briefless barrister’ urges to bring a new and imaginary case against someone and seeks Mr. Kashikar’s permission. Mrs. Kashikar urges to change the accused. Suddenly Karnik takes Ponkshe in his confidence and asks whether he knows any secret regarding Benare. Sukhatme also urges to have a really different kind of accused. All gang up against her when she is away in the washroom. She is accused of the crime of infanticide. The improvised mock-trial starts haltingly and comically. But before long it takes a sinister turn. The witnesses become brazenly personal in their references to the accused while at the same time she is given the assurance that this is nothing but a game. The demarcating line between Benare, the school-teacher and the Benare, the accused becomes blurred. The first witness Ponkshe makes caustic remark (“In many respects”) (Tendulkar 29) in answer to Samant’s innocent passing remark, “Miss Benare is really amazing!” (Tendulkar 29). When asked about Benare’s marital status Ponkshe answers, “to the public eye, she is unmarried” (Tendulkar 32). Being asked about the moral conduct of the accused, he answers, “the accused is a bit too much” (Tendulkar 33) – which means she runs after men too much. Ponkshe even hints that sometimes Benare loses her sanity. Next comes Karnik. When Karnik is asked about the prisoner’s conduct, he asks whether he is asked about the accused’s personal life or the mock-trial and Sukhatme, forgetting purposely that it’s just a mock-trial, answers, “in real life, of course” (Tendulkar 36). When Sukhatme asks him whether he has seen the accused in a compromising situation, he passes the buck to Rokde since the “game’s got to go on” (Tendulkar 37). Rokde says that he has seen Benare sitting in Damle’s room. Sukhatme concludes from this that even to an impartial observer, it reveals that Miss Benare’s behaviour is certainly suspicious. Sukhatme tries to cash upon Benare’s statement, “I’ll give you the names and addresses of twenty five more people with whom, I am alone at times” (Tendulkar 40). One is immediately reminded of the famous Court-scene of Suchitra Bhattacharya’s *Dahan*. Next comes Samant’s turn. Samant words his replies with utmost caution, sensing the sadistic motives of Benare’s tormentors. Feeding his imagination with popular reading fare, he reads out a passage from a novel which fits Benare’s case. Samant says that once he went to Prof. Damle’s house, but the door was locked from inside and he heard a secretive cry from the room. What he relates matches with what Benare has undergone in Prof. Damle’s room when the learned Professor refused to accept her. Samant hits the final nail in Benare’s coffin. Though the whole lot try to needle Benare, at least in the first half of the play she is able to outsmart them. But “at the end of the Second Act a claustrophobic atmosphere is deftly created necessitating the continuance of the mock-trial” (*Dharan* 97).

In the Third Act Benare herself is in the witness-box and is terrified like a trapped animal. Sukhatme customarily prays to the family god for success in butchering Benare. Benare's silent refusal to tell her age gives birth to another sharp controversy. Samant reminds that to ask a lady her age is not courteous. But he is reprimanded. The undaunted Mrs. Kashikar takes the leading role, counts the missed chances of marriage and concludes that it is the sly, new fashion of earning-women not to marry since they manage to get everything without marriage and so tries to evade responsibilities. The hint is quite clear. She even takes offence in Benare's frank and free behaviour with men which even Sukhatme permits. Mrs. Kashikar piles up evidence against her. Balu and Ponkshe reveal how Benare accosted them at a show at Dombivli and Udipi restaurant respectively. Ponkshe reveals how he was urged by the accused for marriage in an oblique way at first and how his refusal led Benare to attempt suicide by taking Tik-20. Karnik reveals how one of the cousins of the accused had informed him that the accused attempted suicide because of a disappointment in love with her own maternal uncle at the age of fifteen. Next Kashikar, breaking the tradition of the court comes to give witness against Benare. The social worker pours his heartfelt venom. He terms Benare as a "sinful canker on the body of society," (Tendulkar 67) advocates the sanctity of marriage and lets others know what he has overheard in Nanasaheb's house. Nanasaheb wants to sack her since "it would be still more immoral to let such a woman teach in such a condition!" (Tendulkar 69). There is no alternative – the woman must be dismissed. Sukhatme at once rejoices at her dismissal saying, "as you sow, so shall reap" (Tendulkar 69). Following the tradition of the court they call witnesses for the defence who are virtually absent and then Sukhatme comes to give witness as the counsel for the prosecution and says that the charge against the accused is truly dreadful, that the accused has made a "heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood" (Tendulkar 70) and that the accused is "public enemy number one" (Tendulkar 70). He pleads that the court should show no mercy to the accused, but give her the greatest and severest punishment for her terrible crime. This very man comes back to give witness as the counsel for the accused and going against the accused's interest just says, "man is in the last analysis, prone to error" (Tendulkar 72) and begs mercy for the accused. The judgement is based upon half truths and fictitious stories presented by the character-assassins and scandal-mongers. Kashikar passes the verdict that the sin must be expiated and that the child in her womb "shall be destroyed" (Tendulkar 76).

It is not that they direct their shafts to Benare alone. Each and every one lashes the whip against the other. Sukhatme, the counsel for the prosecution, introduces Ponkshe in a tone soaked in sarcasm, "my first witness is the world-famous scientist, Mr. Gopal Ponkshe. Well, Ponkshe? Are you happy? I've suddenly promoted you to world fame, eh?" (Tendulkar 31). Sukhatme cuts jokes at Ponkshe's educational failure. ("No one would believe he has just taken his Inter-Science for the second time. Or works as a clerk in the Central Telegraph Office!") (Tendulkar 8). At this Rokde hardly controls his laugh and this laugh subjects him to Ponkshe's caustic remark, "I may have failed my Inter-Science. But at least I did it on my

own father's money. Nonsense!" (Tendulkar 8). Sukhatme cuts jokes at Karnik's expertise in "Intimate Theatre" (Tendulkar 11). Rokde also doesn't miss the chance. When Samant asks in his ignorance whether President Johnson himself will play the role, Rokde answers, "not the real one, this fellow Karnik here plays him" (Tendulkar 15). When Sukhatme tries to cash upon Samant's reference to hypnotism, Ponshe says, "I say, this chap seems to be a good enough lawyer. How's it that his practice is so small?" (Tendulkar 40). In the Third Act, Ponshe, while giving witness to against Benare, reveals how Benare has spoken ill of all of them just to make them more wrathful and vindictive. Ponshe, goes as far as to tell that Benare has told him about Kashikar's suspicion of an entanglement between Rokde and Mrs. Kashikar. Thus each and everyone stretches their imagination as far as they could and only Benare's statement can mirror their true self: "these are the mortal remains of some cultured men of 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" (Tendulkar 7).

The violence of the troupe to which Benare has been subjected is a result of their own failure and helplessness in life. The sadistic behavior towards Benare gives these failed personalities immense pleasure. Professional failure in the case of Sukhatme, Karnik and Ponshe and marital failure in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar make them ruthless towards Benare. The inefficiency of Sukhatme as a lawyer, the childlessness of Kashikars, the non-fulfilment of Ponshe's dreams to become a scientist, the vain attempt of Karnik to be a successful actor and the inability of Rokde to attain an independent adult existence force them to slaughter Benare.

Again, inner consciousness about their own failure makes them merciless towards Benare. When Ponshe reveals that Benare has spoken ill of others, Karnik says, "she must have said something – that I'm a rotten actor, or something. I know what she thinks of me. I know it well" (Tendulkar 62). Earlier we have heard Rokde saying, "whatever happens, it's me she blames. I got a free education of them, didn't I? So I'm paying for my sins!" (Tendulkar 7). If inner consciousness leads men to regret, it also makes them boast and so Sukhatme boasts, "I'm a lawyer to the marrow! I tell you, Kashikar, just leave it to me" (Tendulkar 17).

Mrs. Kashikar, the 'meek shadow' of Mr. Kashikar, who feeds her imagination on 'True Stories' and is noted for her 'dependence syndrome,' is utterly spiteful upon Benare and doesn't spare a single opportunity to humiliate Benare. Her abject dependence, both economic and mental, forces her to become venomous. However this is nothing but a discontented, old woman's irrepressible malevolence against a young, superior and successful one. Mrs. Kashikar runs against the concept of sisterhood.

Sudhir Sonalkar says, "the play is not just violence. It is, of course, about the suppressed sexual violence of our middle class" (20). The play lets loose the innate savagery of the urban middle class. *Silence* is a powerful dramatic statement of the violence that humans are

capable of when actuated by envy, lust and revenge. The play exposes the “moral hypocrisy of orthodoxy” (Nadkarni 194) and brings us closer to a poetic truth, however ugly.

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