

Silence! The Court is in Session: Male Domination Exposed

¹P. Vidhya, ²R. Vishalakshi

¹M.Phil Research Scholar, ²Asst. Professor in English
Department of English, Prist University, Thanjavur, India

Abstract:

The development of Indian English Drama is actually a collective attempt of all the regional writers producing plays in their respective languages and sometimes translating their works into English for wider use and publicity. Rabindranath Tagore with his plays originally written in Bengali and translated into English by himself and others has contributed tremendously to the development of Indian English Drama. His plays *Chitra*, *The Post Office*, *Sacrifice*, *Red O Banners*, *Chandalika*, *Mukta Dhara*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, *Ascetic* etc., are now available in English. Sri Aurobindo's *The Vizers of Bassora*, *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Rodogune*, *Eric* and *Vasavadatta* are another landmark in the history of Indian Drama in English. T.P. Kailasam, a south Indian dramatist, has contributed *The Burden*, *Fulfilment*, *The Purpose*, *Karna: The Brahman's Curse* and *Keechaka*. Since the Independence since 1950 to be precise the name of Vijay Tendulkar has been in the forefront of the Marathi drama and stage. His personality both as man and writer is multifaceted. In the last 55 years he has written stories, novels, one act plays, plays for children as well as adults. Similarly he has done script-writing and newspaper columns as well. And in all these fields he has created an image of his own. Thus he is a creative writer with a fine sensibility and at the same time a contemplative and controversial dramatist. Then there appeared four great regional playwrights on the literary firmament of India. Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Girish Karnad in Kannada, Badal

Sircar in Bengali and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi produced a number of stage-worthy plays that gave a new lease of life to Indian Drama. Later on, their plays were translated into English. Mohan Rakesh's well-known plays are *Ashad Ka Ek Din* (One Day in Ashadha) *Lehron Ke Rajhans* (Great Swans of the Waves) and *Aadhe Adhurey* (Half-Way House). have added a new dimension to Indian Drama. Vijay Tendulkar the Marathi playwright of this century, has to his credit well-known plays like *Kamala*, *The Vultures*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Silence! The Court is in Session* and *Sakharam Binder*. Beginning his career as a dramatist in mid-fifties Tendulkar the prolific writer has twenty-eight full-length plays, twenty-four one-act plays, and eleven children's dramas to his credit a good many of them have been translated and produced in major Indian languages. Vijay Tendulkar is a leading contemporary Indian playwright, screen and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist and social commentator. For the past four decades he has been the most influential dramatist and theatre personality in Marathi, the principal language of the state of Maharashtra, which had a continuous literary history since the end of the classical period in India and has nearly seventy-five million speakers today. Tendulkar was born in 1928 and brought up in the heart of Bombay town, in Kandevadi, a small lane in Girgaon. A lower middle-class community crowded its elements. The men were mostly shop keepers and clerks. His father Dhondopant Tendulkar, was head clerk at a British publishing firm called Longmans, Green and company (now Orient

Longman). Tendulkar's brother Ragunath and sister Leela were many years older than he. Tendulkar was a sickly child having persistent cough and asthmatic wheezing. This made his parents over protective. Though two younger were born much later, he remained the favourite of his parents. As Tendulkar's father was an enthusiastic writer, director and actor of amateur plays in their mother tongue, Marathi, he took young Tendulkar to the rehearsals of his plays. They were a kind of magic show for the young child of four. That was where he saw persons change in to characters. At that time women's roles were played by men and young Tendulkar was greatly amazed to see men actors suddenly changing their voice and movement to become women. As a child, except what his father staged. Young Tendulkar never saw any theater. His brother Ragunath used to act too and like his father he was interested in literature. Writers often came home to meet his father, so he grew up in a kind of literary atmosphere. On Sunday mornings, his father used to take him to a large bookshop owned by his publisher friend. Young Tendulkar wandered among the shelves and picked up a good of children's book in Marathi. His father bought them all for him and would often tell him stories from them. When he grew up into a boy, his brother Ragunath used to take him to English movies by cutting school. Tendulkar develop interest in watching English films from them on and they had abiding influence in his career as a playwright later on his life. He has made a mark in the field of journalism also. Because of his highly individual outlook on and vision of life, and because of his personal style of writing he has made a powerful impression in the field of literature and drama, and has given the post-independence Marathi drama a new idiom. By doing this he has put Marathi drama on the national and even international map.

Introduction:

Vijay Tendulkar's three-act play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is in the form of a mock court trial. The sonar Moti Tenement Association which stages shows frequently for the enlightenment of the masses has arranged a mock trial of President Johnson who has produced atomic weapons and proved a menace to mankind. The first participant in the mock trial to arrive is a lady school teacher by name Leela Benare. Since she is new to the place, she is escorted to the auditorium by a local villager by name Samant. Benare talks very freely with Samant, expressing her wish to run away to some far-off place where she can live undisturbed. She says vehemently that she is a perfect teacher, teaching her lessons and correcting student's exercises without giving room to anybody to complain against her. Hence, the authorities of the school have no right to probe into her personal life. From her talk we can guess that she is faced with the prospect of severe punishment on account of her personal lapses. At this time the other participants in the proposed trial arrive. They are kashikar, a hypocritical social activist, his childless wife and their adopted son Balu Rokde, an unpopular lawyer by name Sukhatme who spends most of his time swatting files, an inter-failed, self-styled scientist by name Ponshe and an actor of the modern Theatre movement by name Karnik. They all feel that the Johnson trial, conducted several times, has become very hackneyed. They want to experiment with a new theme. When benare is in the inner room, the others decide to conduct a trial of an unwed mother charged with infanticide. Benare is assigned this role because the others, especially Rokde, ponshe and karnik, suspect her to be pregnant, though unmarried. Benare is unwilling to play this part but is persuaded by the others who say that this is only the show and does not refer to anyone in reality.

The characters are said to be fictitious ones. But the point is that Benare is in reality pregnant and the scandal-mongers are determined to use the mock trial as a tool to expose her misconduct. It is like the drama arranged by Hamlet in Shakespeare's play to bring to light his uncle's villainy. A great deal of the fuss is made in the beginning about quite insignificant matters such as the usher's staff, the judge's wig and gavel, the positioning of the chairs, etc. For want of persons, Sukhatme comes forward to play the two antithetical roles prosecuting counsel and counsel for the accused. The trial begins in a deceptively harmless manner, with Sukhatme seeking an adjournment of the trial by fifteen seconds to enable the participants, including the judge, to go out and spit *paan* juice. The adjournment here is a parody of the adjournment for silly reasons that scuttle the functioning of real courts. People are afraid of giving incriminatory evidence and either remain dumb or give evasive replies. This is represented by the 'world-famous scientist' Ponshe who says vaguely that Benare is in the habit of running after men but does not specify any man in particular. Again, he says that Benare sometimes behaves erratically, as if she were off her head. When asked to cite instances, he gives a humorous twist to the trial by saying that she is ticking out her tongue at him like a lunatic. Karnik is equally evasive. When asked to define motherhood, Karnik puts both human mothers and bitches on the same plane as both give birth to young ones. When Sukhatme tries to pin him down by asking whether he has ever seen Benare in a compromising situation, he again evades and says that Rokde knows much more about Benare's personal life than he. Rokde comes to the witness-box, shaking in his shoes. After much persuasion, he says that he saw Benare in Damle's room one late evening. Benare argues that it is wrong to

misconstrue the mere fact of her sitting with a man. She has sat with the 65-year-old principal several times. It is foolish to argue that she was having an affair with him. Vexed, Benare says that she has sat with more than twenty five men. What Benare says is quite true. It is stupid to suspect a man and a woman who merely happen to sit side by side. Sukhatme argues with perverse pleasure that her own statement is a solid proof of her promiscuous contacts with innumerable men. Samant who is called upon next to give evidence adds flesh and blood to the skeleton sketch given by Rokde. He says that he overheard the conversation between the illicit lovers. Benare, pregnant, was appealing to Damle to marry her and save her from ignominy but Damle turned a deaf ear to her appeal. He did not budge even when she threatened to commit suicide, killing her unborn child along with herself. The innocent Samant plays into the hands of the scandal-mongers by borrowing apt sentences from a book in his hand. He does not understand why Benare takes exception to his charges because she believes it is all a show. Benare wants to walk out of the den of vicious calumniators but cannot do so because the door is accidentally locked on the outside. Samant's evidence having tightened the grip on Benare, Ponshe, Rokde and Karnik come forward to give evidence for the second time. They vie with one another in slinging mud at the helpless victim with Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar unhesitatingly adding fuel to fire with their vicious remarks. Rokde says that one late night Benare met him and pressed him to marry her. Rokde says that he not only refused to yield but slapped her on the cheek, ignoring her threat. Ponshe says that Benare tempted him also and, when rejected, said that she was only joking and was not after him seriously. Karnik refutes Rokde's earlier statement and says that he saw Benare beat Rokde for not yielding to her.

Kashikar, setting aside his role as judge, condescends to give evidence. He contributes his mite, saying that he heard the Chairman of the Education Society giving instruction over the phone to dismiss Benare from her teacher's post for running after men and becoming pregnant without getting marriage. Vidhya 27 In his summing up Sukhatme, prosecuting counsel, says that Benare, if let unpunished, will dynamite the institution of marriage and ruin society. Playing the other role as counsel for the accused, Sukhatme says that human nature is prone to err and therefore Benare should be treated with the utmost sympathy. Benare is at last given a chance to defend herself. She says that when she was barely fourteen her maternal uncle seduced her. When she insisted on his marrying her he turned tail. The next to play havoc in her life was Prof. Damle whose intellect cast a spell on her. But Damle did not care for her soul of devotion. He liked only her body. Having enjoyed sex with her and got her pregnant he deserted her. Needing a husband and a stable home to protect her child, Benare sought many a man but they all scorned and rejected her. Without any pretention she openly admits her moral weakness and tragic dilemma courageously. Leela Benare's defence of herself against the onslaughts of the upholders of social norms in a long soliloquy, has become famous in the history of contemporary Marathi theatre. In fact, during the court proceedings, on several occasions, her objections and protestations are drowned by the judge's cry of *Silence!* and the banging of the gavel. Benare's monologue is more a self-justification than an attack on society's hypocrisies. It is poignant, sensitive and highlights the vulnerability of women in our society. Kashikar stops her short and says that she has proved a menace to society. Her immorality will spread on and ruin the society if she is not punished. So he

recommends her sacking from the school. He orders that she shall live but that her child shall be destroyed. Benare is shocked and falls down unconscious. At this time an outsider peeps in and asks when the show is going to begin. All the participants leave hastily, remarking that Benare has taken the show to heart. Kashikar notices a bottle of TIK-20, a dreadful poison, lying by the side of the unconscious Benare. He realizes that Benare has swallowed poison and Vidhya 28 committed suicide. He knows that it is risky to stand by and so sneaks away noiselessly along with the others. At the end of the play, light is focused on the dead body of Benare and the surroundings are enveloped in darkness. A song about the pillaging of a sparrow's nest, symbolic of the ruin of Benare's life, is heard from somewhere unseen. Benare dies not because of the adverse trial but because the men she will have to confront in real life will be as cruel as the participants in the trial. The pity is that her death does not seem to have a softening effect on anybody. Nobody is concerned about her death. The main theme of *Silence! The court is in session* is the crushing effect that male domination has on women which is one of the social traumas found in society. There are two women characters in the play, Mrs. Kashikar and Benare, and both are oppressed by men, the former in a mild manner and the latter in such a relentless way as to cause her to commit suicide.

Conclusion:

Tendulkar in his renowned play *Silence! The Court is in Session* raises very important questions on the need of maintaining social stability, moral sanctity and legal integrity. The story of the play revolves upon the character of Miss Benare, the heroine of the play. She is a school teacher who is dedicated to her profession. She has never gone late to school. She has given her entire self to the upliftment of her school children

to the extent of losing her health. She has always been very strict with his students. But her children always adore her and are willing to do anything for her. Her professional popularity has caused the envy of her colleagues at school and even the school management. They plan to institute an enquiry for a small bit of scandal about her. Miss Benare is frank, freedom loving and independent woman. She feels that her life is her own and nobody needs dictate her how or what to do with it. She cannot understand why the management should try to dismiss her from her job when she is impeccable as a school teacher. It is not proper on their part to punish her for the unfortunate happenings in her private life. Benare confesses that she is a victim of love and life. She has not harmed anyone if at all she has harmed anybody, it was her own self. She feels that everyone around her, including her own people and her lovers has betrayed her. This being the case she is already victim of life and it is meaningless on the part of the management or the society to victimize her further. It will be tantamount to adding insult to injury. So far we have examined the stand of Miss Benare as a victim of life and society. But during the course of the mock-trial of Miss Benare for infanticide, the witnesses for the prosecution prove that she had a love affair with her maternal uncle while she just fourteen and tried to commit suicide when she could not marry him because her mother and others were against it calling a sin; that she loved Prof. Damle a married man with children and became pregnant by him and he had jilted her; that she tried to persuade her colleagues like Ponkshe and Balu Rokde into marrying her and fathering her child, and that she carried a bottle of TIK-20 in her bag with an intention to commit suicide if everything failed. In the court Miss Benare's crimes of infanticide and illegitimate motherhood is established by the

prosecution as crimes against society. Public prosecutor Sukhatme points out that motherhood is sacred and a mother bears the responsibility of rearing her child unmindful of her own difficulties. Motherhood is sacred and pure. A mother weaves a magic circle with her whole existence in order to protect and preserve her little one. So he points out that Miss Benare has brought shame to the holy motherhood by her conduct. He says, The woman who is an accused has made a heinous bolt on the sacred brow of motherhood which is purer than heaven itself. For that any punishment, however great, that the law may give her will be too mild by far. The character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality. Not only that her conduct has blackened all social and moral values. The accused is public enemy number one. If such socially destructive tendencies are encouraged to flourish, this country and its culture will be totally destroyed. Sukhatme further points out that Miss Benare has committed far more serious crime than infanticide by unmarried motherhood. If the latter is permitted unchecked, promiscuity will become the order of the day. In this connection he observes: The charge against the accused is one of infanticide. But the accused has committed a far more serious crime. I mean unmarried motherhood. Motherhood without marriage has always been considered a very great sin by our religion and our traditions. Moreover if the accuser's intention of bringing up the offspring of this unlawful maternity is carried to completion, I have a dreadful fear that the very existence of society will be in danger. There will be no such thing as moral values left. (Silence 63) He further draws the attention of the court how unwed motherhood will pull down the institution of marriage to the dust and become a breeding ground for immorality. In this connection he aptly points out to the judge: Milord,

infanticide is a dreadful act. But bringing up the child of an illegal union is certainly more horrifying. If it is encouraged, there will no such thing as the institution of marriage. Immorality will flourish. Before our eyes, our beautiful dream of a society governed by tradition will crumble into dust. (Silence 61) So Sukhatme appeals to the court to give the utmost punishment to the accused Miss Benare who has tarnished the institution of marriage and shaken the citadel of morality by trying to blow it out. He says very forcibly: The accused has plotted to dynamite the very roots of our tradition, our pride in ourselves, our culture and our religion. It is the sacred and imperative duty of your Lordship and every wise and thoughtful citizen amongst us to destroy the plot at once. (Silence 61) Through Benare-Damle episode, Tendulkar in his *Silence!* exposes society's lop-sided treatment to woman. Miss. Benare is accused of infanticide and unmarried motherhood. She is considered the worst enemy of the sacred institutions of marriage and motherhood. She is considered a bolt on the established code of moral values of the society. The court is apprehensive that she will pollute the young minds at school with her own conduct and hence it should chain down her irresponsibility. It pronounces that she shall live but the child in her womb will be destroyed for she should not carry any memento of her illicit amour and encourage promiscuity in society. But the same court does not even summon Prof. Damle the victimizer of Miss. Benare as a witness. Not a single word of condemnation of his demeaning act of adultery is uttered by anyone of Miss Benare's immediate colleagues. The court allows him to go scot-free whereas it punishes Miss Benare very cruelly. This shows that society has different yardsticks to measure man and woman.

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