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Decoding Patriarchal Patterns in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence!*

The Court is in Session

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Abstract:

Patriarchy, a deep-rooted societal phenomenon where males, no matter educated or uneducated, culturally refined or unrefined - dominate females to claim their physical, psychological, social and intellectual supremacy over them - is unmistakably manifested with all its naked realities in Vijay Tendulkar's celebrated play, *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Being horribly driven by various self-claimed patriarchal patterns, how a cluster of characters coming from a cross section of people in society under the pretext of holding a mock trial, launches multitudinous, malicious attacks to reduce Miss Leela Benare, a dedicated school teacher of self-determination, self-dependence and self-assertiveness - into almost a state of nonentity. Tendulkar seems to have picked up his theatrical creative endeavour as a mouthpiece to advocate women's causes in this brilliant play by making clarion calls for the collective self-questioning over our prejudiced positions in the gender biased conventions of women-question. This paper, most meticulously, attempts to decode such age-old patriarchal patterns most alarmingly exhibited in the play *Silence! The Court is in Session*.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchy, power structure, exploitation, subjugation, judicial system.

The word 'patriarchy' derives from the Greek 'patriarches' which connotes a society where power used to be held and subsequently handed over down the generations to the elder males. In modern context sociologists employ the phrase 'patriarchal society' to mark the social structure where the position of power and privilege is held by men in every sphere of society as the head of the family, leader of a social group, boss of an office, chief of a government etc. (Napikoski, 2017). In this context Valentine Moghadam's opinion seems relevant when she says, "the senior man has authority over everyone else in the family, including younger men, and women are subject to distinct forms of control and subordination" (2004, p. 141). But there happens to be other ideas about the origin of the word 'patriarches' such as the one where it is believed that it is the Latin words 'pater' (father) and the 'arch' (rule) which gave birth to the word 'patriarchy'; in other words the term may directly mean 'rule of the father' (The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English, 2018). Some scholars believe that the phenomenon of patriarchy was a long process that gradually took its robust form over a period of nearly 2500 years from 3100 to 600 BC (Gerda, 1986, p. 8). In a patriarchal society men forcibly feel a kind of self-imposed sense of privilege over women. Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt calls it a 'Cultural Lobotomy' (Leavitt,

1975, p. 286) which men perform in order to subvert the physical and intellectual competence and potential of women under the most unfair and abusive conditions.

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar is not only one of the most contributing contemporary playwrights in Marathi theatre but also one of the powerful voices in various social and political questions in India and beyond. In most of his plays women and their causes play crucial and thought-provoking roles. He seems to have picked up his theatrical creative endeavour as a mouthpiece to advocate women's causes. N. S. Dharan observes, "Though not a self-acknowledged feminist, [Tendulkar] treats his women characters with understanding and compassion, while pitting them against men who are selfish, hypocritical and brutally ambitious" (Dharan, 1999, p. 28).

Silence! The Court is in Session is considered by many to be Tendulkar's masterpiece. The play is, indeed, a translation of the original Marathi play *Shantala! Court Chalu Aahe!* (1967). The play is based on a short story titled *Traps (Die Panne)* written in 1956 by Friedrich Durrenmatt. But Tendulkar's originality is unmistakably stamped throughout the play. Like most of his other celebrated works in this play as well Tendulkar articulates his serious concerns about and lodges protest against women's deprivation in terms of their rights to dignity, liberty, individuality and life. In this regard Smita Paul notes,

"The women characters in Tendulkar's theatre undergo a series of sufferings and tortures as the victims of the hegemonic power-structure. In the male-dominated theatre-world they are constantly being 'other-ed'. In *Silence!* the focal point of interest lies is the struggle between women like Benare and her antagonists headed by the orthodox Kashikar and his associates." (Paul, 2010, p. 34).

Talking about how his reactions to social injustices take shape in his writings, Tendulkar says in an interview,

As an individual—or rather as a social being—I feel deeply involved in the existing state of my society (because I am affected by it though no immediately in some cases or not as much as others are) and in my own way brood over it. . . .

As a writer I now find myself persistently inquisitive, nonconformist, ruthlessly cold and brutal as compared to the other committed and human me.

As a social being I am against all exploitation and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end.

As a writer I feel fascinated by the violent exploited-exploiter relationship and obsessively deep into it instead of taking a position against it. That takes me to a point where I feel that this relationship is eternal, a fact of life however cruel, and will never end. Nor that I relish this thought while it grips me but I cannot shake it off. (Bandyopadhyay, 2003, xliii- xliv)

In the play *Silence! The Court is in Session* the Sonar Moti Tenement Progressive Association (SMTPA), a Bombay based amateur theatre group, is going to stage one of their awareness raising plays titled 'Mock Trial of Lyndon B. Johnson' in a village

adjoining to Bombay by enacting the roles in a mock-trial of former US president Johnson on account of his policy on nuclear weapons. Besides Miss Leela Benare, a modern, independent, self-sufficient, free-thinking, school teacher of about 34 years, we encounter a cross section of people - Kashikar couple, Balu Rokde, Ponkshe, Sukhatme, Karnik, Rawte, Samant - coming from the middle-class of the metropolitan Bombay. N. S. Dharan rightly points out, "Tendulkar brings them together under the banner of an amateur theatre, in order to highlight the hypocrisy latent in this microscopic cross-section of the milieu of the metropolitan Bombay (Mumbai) middle class" (Dharan, 1999, p. 50).

Miss Leela Benare is a dedicated teacher; she gets love and respect from her students and she is very proud of her role as an educator. She says to Samant, "In school, when the first bell rings, my foot's already on the threshold. I haven't heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my teaching. I'm never behind-hand with my lessons! Exercises corrected on time, too! Not a bit of room for disapproval -- I don't give an inch of it to any one! (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 5). She gives an obvious hint to Samant of how she values her little students in terms of their pure innocence in comparison to adults who often embitter her life. She notes, "They don't have the blind pride of thinking they know everything. There is no nonsense stuffed in their heads. They don't scratch you till you bleed, then run away like cowards (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 5). She knows how her male colleagues are so deeply jealous of her success as an educated and self-conscious teacher who has taken full charge of her own life. She confidently but ironically comes bold and dares the patriarchal social set up which she finds so hostile to her independent-existence, as she says,

But what can they do to me? What can they do? However hard they try, what can they do? They're holding an enquiry, if you please! But my teaching's prefect. I've put my whole life into it – I've worn myself to a shadow in this job! Just because of one bit of slander, what can they do to me? Throw me out? Let them! I haven't hurt anyone. Anyone at all! If I've hurt anybody, it's been myself. But is that any kind of reason for throwing me out? Who are these people to say what I can or can't do? My life is my own – I haven't sold it to anyone for a job! My will is my own. My wishes are my own. No one can kill those -- no one! I'll do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide" (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 6)

As Prof. Damle, who was supposed to play the role of the fourth witness, is absent, Samant is selected for the role of Prof. Damle. Now, in order to overcome the slumberous afternoon and also to introduce Samant to his role in the play to be staged later in the evening, a new mock-trial is suggested other than the scheduled one. Here Tendulkar with incredible dexterity exploiting this well-designed naked mock-trial, strives hard to expose various patriarchal evil-patters that lie deeply rooted in the hypocritical urban consciousness. When Miss Benare goes into the wash-room, Sukhatme suggests that they may make Miss Benare the accused in the mock-trial which is immediately approved by all the co-actors including Mrs. Kashikar who in

spite of being a woman herself backs up the idea as she says, “We’ll be able to see what the trial of a woman is like” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 31). When Miss Benare reappears on the stage singing, Ponkshe declares, “Miss Leela Benare, you have been arrested on suspicion of a crime of an extremely grave nature and brought as a prisoner before the bar of this court” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 33).

Miss Benare, all of a sudden, finds herself in a mouse-trap when Mr. Kashikar as playing the self-imposed role of the judge, declares, “Prisoner Miss Benare under section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code, you are accused of the crime of Infanticide (foeticide). Are you guilty or not guilty of a fore mentioned crime...?” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 33)

Visibly Benare feels too shocked to comprehend the situation. Sukhatme in a mocking tone ironically tries to relax her by saying, “After all, it’s a game. Just a game, that’s all. Why are you so serious?” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 35). Still Miss Benare may have sensed something fishy in her co-actors’ attempt in selecting such a sensitive topic to label a charge upon her as she desperately requests, “I don’t like your word at all! Infanticide...Infanticide! Why don’t you accuse me instead of snatching public property...? I plead not guilty. I could not kill even a cockroach. I am scared to do it. How could I kill a new born child...?” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 29) but Mr. Kashikar with his age-old male ego, severely admonishes her for creating disturbances in the procedure of the court in session. He quotes a Sanskrit proverb in order to justify the gravity of the issue they are dealing with in the session, “Mother and the Motherland both are even higher than heaven” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 42). Sukhatme, playing both the roles – the Counsel of the Prosecution and Counsel of Defence, comes up with his own ill arguments upholding the conservative norms of the society as he says,

“Considering this, what would we respectable citizen say if any woman were to take the life of the delicate bundle of joy she has borne, we would say, there could be no baser or more devilish thing on the earth. I intend to establish by means of evidence that the prisoner has done this same vile deed” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 43).

All most all the witnesses - Karnik, Ponkshe, Rokde, Sukhatme, Samant, Mr. Kashikar his wife Mrs. Kashikar - find an opportunity to dig up Miss Benare’s complicated, troubled past life in the name of judicial procedure. Miss Benare is nakedly cross-examined in public. They find sadistic pleasure to use their self-assumed patriarchal power in humiliating an individual who in spite of being born as a woman, dares to defy patriarchal dominance with her self-determination and self-assertiveness. In almost no time make believe atmosphere turns into the real world where Miss Benare’s personal life is ruthlessly dissected in public.

Almost all the characters except Samant have been going through some sort of frustration in their respective life and this frustration may have embittered their life. Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar being childless in their conjugal life, have to adopt Rokde, an orphan. The social positions which they may have expected to reach in life, remain an illusion to most of them. Ponkshe failed in his intermediate examinations; success

in these examinations would have opened his access to university studies that might have materialized his goal of becoming a scientist; Sukhatme could not manage to realize his dream of becoming a successful lawyer; “just sits alone in the Barrister’s room at court, swatting flies with legal precedents! And in his tenement, he sits alone killing houseflies” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 9); Karnik could not establish his himself as an actor in theatre in the city, though he considers himself an expert on “Intimate Theatre”; Rokde has no parents or home of his own and has to be dependent upon his foster parents Kashikars in every aspect in life. These frustrated men in order to repudiate their defeatism in individual life, need an unguarded object like Miss Benare. This also gives them an opportunity to subjugate the weaker sex in society to attest their dominance in the social hierarchy supported by age old patriarchal patterns. These failed members of patriarchy do try to have some predatory pleasure in her pained feelings and helplessness. Nitika Garg rightly points out,

The Kashikars, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik of the play emerge as individuals belonging to the middle-class who prove to be ineffectual and discontented. Their words and actions prove, beyond any doubt, that they are neurotic, sadistic, conspiratorial and even treacherous. It is not out of genuine love for drama that they have turned theatre activity, but out of a sheer sense of their own personal failures in real life. Dejected, discontented and still daring, they can only behave cruelly towards one another. To expect them to be refined, truthful and generous is perhaps to ask for the impossible. (Gerg, 2015, p. 316)

Ponshe, the first witness, talking about the moral character of Miss Benare does not hesitate to express his disapproval for her being free-spirited and unconventional in life. He accuses her of being “a bit too much” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 45). It is he who launches the concerted assault towards Miss Benare’s character. He tries his best to establish his claim that Miss Benare, once, tried to seduce him into marriage. When Balu Rokde, the youngest member of the group, is asked to give his witness against Miss Benare, he, overcoming his initial nervousness, claims that Miss Benare, once, tried to behave with him in an improper way after a performance at Dombivili few weeks ago. He maintains that she literary tried to seduce him by holding his hand to hers. He even goes to the extent to claim that he had to slap her for such an ill-offer but later we come to know that it was not Balu but Benare who slapped him after getting rejected. So the question of Balu’s credibility stands extremely dubious specially if we take Balu’s stored up grudges against Miss Benare in account of his getting hurt by the repeated teasing of Miss Benare calling him ‘Balu’ - into consideration. Then, again, Rokde, under the ill-designed interrogation conducted by Sukhatme, is almost made to recount that once when he went to Prof. Damle’s house at dusk, he found Prof. Damle extremely unwilling to let him in and he was immediately asked to go away. Rokde took it for granted that something must have been going on inside the house between Prof. Damle and Miss Benare. Though Miss Benare strongly objects to such a narrative, all the representatives of the patriarchal forces of society carry on their orchestrated attempt to nakedly expose her private life in public in the same patriarchal vein. Even a simpleton like Samant is made to join

the party with the chauvinistic figures in the play in order to pile up more spurious evidences against Miss Benare. Sukhatme makes Samant play an imaginary role as if he reached Prof. Damle's house when Balu had left it. Samant in his maiden effort to play the role of a witness, being unable to manage such a nervous position, just reads out pages from a novel where he narrates that he heard a woman crying in a failed argument with Prof. Damle in his house. Though Benare protests against such a brazen lie, it was enough for Sukhatme, now the Counsel of the Prosecution, to substantiate the already framed charges against Miss Benare in a very crafty manner.

The burden of insult, inflicted upon her mind, was so full of agony that Miss Benare now could suspect her co-actors to have plotted against her. Though her eyes are brimming with tears, she still tries to stand resolute and picks up her bag to go away from such a concerted conspiracy in the name of a mock-trial. While boiling with rage she could only articulate, "Note it down. Note everything down! Just take down note after note!" (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 66). Now when she tries to escape from such a patriarchal trap, she only finds herself miserably confined inside a room bolted and locked from outside. It is extremely shocking when we find that someone from her own gender like Mrs. Kashikar becomes so rude and hard-boiled towards her. She even forcibly drags Miss Benare to the witness box by pulling her hair. The reason of her being absolutely heartless and insensitive towards Miss Benare's suffering, seems to be her burning jealousy for her. Mrs. Kashikar's own life in account of her dependence on her husband, with no financial or social independence puts her in sharp contrast with Miss Benare who leads a life of complete independence; besides, Miss Benare is quick-witted, educated, employed and good looking but still unmarried. Mrs. Kashikar's her jealous mind comes clear to us, when she complains,

That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care about responsibilities! Let me tell you - in my time even if a girl was snub nosed, sallow hunchbacked or anything whatever, she could still get married. It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread through our society... look how loudly she laughs, how she sings, dances, cracks jokes...and wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out. (Tendulkar, 2017, p.76, 77)

Whenever Miss Benare attempts to react, Mr. Kashikar, as the self-chosen judge of the mock-trial orders her to be silent by banging his gravel. The very sound of the banging of the gravel and customary order of keeping silence in a court in session - symbolize patriarchal practice of dominance over the weaker sex and this patriarchal practice has always been active in stifling the female voice of protest over the ages.

Miss Benare is seriously charged with illegitimate relationship with her maternal uncle and later with Prof. Damle. Finally she breaks down and narrates the story of her getting victimized in a society thoroughly male centric and unsympathetic towards female suffering. She admits how in her juvenile stage she failed in her love affair with her maternal uncle, "Why, I was hardly fourteen! I didn't even know what sin was, I didn't! I insisted on marriage. So I could live my beautiful lovely dreams

openly... But all of them-my mother too- were against it, and my brave man turned trail and ran” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 105). In a male dominated society how the life of an innocent girl can turn into an intolerable existence, she bitterly realizes that and pathetically expresses her disillusionment about life, “Life is a book that goes ripping into pieces. 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 something that’s nothing- or a nothing that’s something” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 103). Then, she opens her mouth about Prof. Damle whom Miss Benare took as her intellectual god and states how he in the name of love formed the relationship with her and once his lust of the flesh is gratified, he just cast her away like an enjoyed commodity. She cries out in pain, “I offered my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering and went his way. He didn’t care about them. He was not a god. He was a man. For him everything was the body! That is all! (Tendulkar, 2017, pp. 105-106). In this regard, Veena Dass observes,

It is important here to note that these charges became verbalized only in the absence of Prof. Damle. If he were present, the typical backbiting attitude of the self righteous Indian male would not have helped reveal the truth. Miss Benare was thrown into the dock and there she remained trying to joke herself out of it, but trapped too murderously by the male vultures around her. Witness after witness, charges upon charges we heaped upon her. The defense lawyer was so frightened that he only asked for a little mercy on her behalf. Miss Benare who is on the offensive at the beginning found herself trapped at the close of the play. (Dass, 1994, p. 10)

In a patriarchal social structure Miss Benare’s sexual relationship with Prof. Damle is severely condemned as a serious moral lapse and considered to be extremely harmful for the society. She is, as per patriarchal standard, not entitled to any sort of social or individual sympathy and no one tries to understand the difficulties that society inflicts upon an unmarried mother. Hence, her co-actors fail to realize the helplessness and desperateness which forced her to approach Samant and Ponkshe to marry her so that she can provide her child with a legitimate identity. She realizes the importance of her body for her unborn child, as she says, “A tender little bud – of what will be a lisping, laughing, dancing little life – my son – my whole existence! I want my body now for him – for him alone” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 106). In this context Shanta Gokhle justifiably points out

Men aren’t superior beings by definition. They must prove themselves so before they can command her respect. The man she has had a passionate relationship with and whose child she is carrying, is one of the few men she has respected for his fine mind and apparent integrity. . . . He does not have the strength to stand by her and own his child. She has made a desperate bid to get one another of the unattached men in her group to marry her in order to give the coming child, a name. Predictably, not one has agreed to her proposal. It is in this delicate state body and mind that she is trapped by her colleagues into being the accused in the mock trial. (Gokhle, 2007, p. 32-33)

In an oppressive patriarchal ideology the tyrants do not mind taking recourse to the cultural and traditional pretext in order to establish their masculine views. Sukhatme does the same when he comments, “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. (Tendulkar, 2017, p.99-100)

when Mr. Kashikar, the judge, comes to pronounce the final verdict, before that, Miss Benare is ridiculously given only 10 seconds to defend her position. This is the time when Miss Benare stands up firmly and against such a terrible torrent of abuse and character assassination in public, boldly says, “Yes, I have a lot to say” (Tendulkar, 2017, p. 102). In the following monologue she opens her heart to break the patriarchal patterns that her co-actors previously tried to impose upon her.

My life was a burden to me. [Heaving a great sigh] But when you can't lose it, you realize the value of it. [...] There's great joy in a suicide that's failed. It's greater even than the pain of living. [...] I swallowed that poison, but didn't even let a drop of it touch them! [...] I cried inside, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair, and I taught them hope. (Tendulkar, 2017, p.102)

Her declaration gets bolder and sharper as she exposes the patriarchal bigotry and individual chauvinism prevalent in the twentieth century, “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. (Tendulkar, 2017, p.104). The way how Sukhatme ruthlessly tries to put the final nail in the coffin of women's independence - unmistakably reflects the naked strike of the reactionary ideas of an utterly patriarchal mindset, “No allowance must be made because the accused is a woman. Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. ‘Na striswatantryamarhati. ‘Woman is not fit for independence’” (Tendulkar, 2017, p.111).

Finally the judgment that Mr. Kashikar passes - is full of patriarchal hypocrisies and nothing short of a complete mockery of justice as he pronounces,

The crimes you have committed are the most terrible. The mortality which you have shown forgiveness for them...through your conduct was the mortality you were planning to impart to the youth of tomorrow. It must be said that the school officials have done a work of merit in deciding to remove you from the job...There is no forgiveness... No memento of your sin should remain for the future generation. Therefore the court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed... (Tendulkar, 2017, pp. 107-108)

Relating the word ‘silence’ repeatedly used in the play with the problems of judiciary system prevailing in our society in terms of women's social justice - Suchismita Hazra's comment sounds highly relevant,

“Tendulkar’s *Silence!* is a critique of patriarchal values and institutions and shows how law operates as an instrument in silencing the voice of women. The word ‘silence’ in the title has different levels of significations. Literally it means the judge’s order for maintaining silence in the court-room but metaphorically it implies legally silencing the weaker sex’s plea for justice. The urban middle class society which Tendulkar presents in this play enforces law to subjugate women by maintaining a hypocritical moral code”. (Hazra, 2012, p. 99-100)

In conclusion it must be noted that, that Vijay Tendulkar has always been one of the most powerful voices in contemporary India in conveying his deep resentment against multifarious injustices often meted out to the most unguarded women in society – is most unquestionably attested in the entire course of the play. Tendulkar deliberately leaves the play with no panacea to Miss Banere’s crisis. He only tries to critically draw our attention to the serious issues which deal with the collective psychology under the dark, heavy shadows of various patriarchal patterns in society. Miss Benare has a simple dream of leading a life of self-determination, self-dependence and self-assertiveness free from the torturing patriarchal dominance but that simple dream in the nightmarish patriarchal fetters and captivity, just remains to be a mirage as Candy Elizabeth rightly notes, “Thus far women have been mere echoes of men. Our laws and constitution, our creeds and codes and customs of social life are all of masculine origin. The true woman is yet a dream for future” (Candy, 1994, pp. XIV-V)

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