

**TENDULKAR'S *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION: 'AN ENQUIRY AGAINST INDIVIDUAL'***

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**Abstract**

Vijay Tendulkar (1928 – 2008) is the famous playwright who undertook experiments in play-writing. His plays became controversial because of the themes he has handled. He has raised social, political, ethical issues in his plays. The aim of the present paper is to show how an individual who is excelled than others in many qualities is trapped and humiliated on so called social and moral grounds. Miss Benare, the protagonist of *Silence! The Court is in Session*, is a good teacher having good qualities and popular among her students. She is enthusiastic in life. However, the members of her group are jealous to her because she is distinguished than them. They arrange mock-trial of the play. In the mock-trial, the charge of infanticide is inflected on her. The unexpected similarity between the charge and her real life shocked her. All others trap her by forming a group. They become cruel and inhuman and humiliate Miss Benare. Actually, all of them are unsuccessful in their lives. Their failure is brought out by Miss Benare. As an individual they are mediocre, however, in league with they become strong and powerful to attack the ablest Miss Benare. While reflecting social reality, Tendulkar exhibited an individual as 'totally helpless against the bitter circumstances in life in the modern world.'

**Key Words:** cruelty, violence, exploitation, social evils, suffering

Vijay Tendulkar (6 January 1928 – 19 May 2008), a famous Indian playwright, contributed to the development of Indian drama. His themes of social concern, experiments undertaken in writing and his creative genius made him one of the important dramatists in India. He wrote twenty-eight plays. The inspiration and sources of his plays are from real life incidents or social, political, historical facts that throw light on social realities. Even, "*Silence! The Court is in Session* is modeled on actual dialogues the dramatist has heard a mock-trial enacted by a group of players." (Wadikar, 38) Hence, some of his plays became controversial. Tendulkar remained highly influential dramatist for over five decades. He is recipient of twelve awards including *SangeetNatakAkademyAward*, *Padma Bhushan Award*, *KamalabaiChattopadhyay Award*, *National Film Award*, *Filmfare Award*, *SaraswatiSamman*, *KalidasSamman* and *Maharashtra State Government Award* which show his great contribution to plays. In his plays, he shows exploited, tortured, victimized people in different ways. His plays like *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *GhashiramKotwal*(1972), *Sakharam Binder* (1972) *Gidhade*, (1961)

*Kamala*, (1981) became popular because of the themes and innovative experiments. Even though, he attempted his hand in various forms like novels, short stories, translated works, literary essays, political journalism, screen and television writing, he became popular as a dramatist. So Kumud Mehta writes, “*Shantata* brought Tendulkar recognition on a national scale. He came to be regarded with Mohan Rakesh, BadalSirkar, and GirishKarnad, as a leading force in a national theatre movement.” (Tendulkar, Introduction, iv)

The present paper explores how the ablest individual having distinguished qualities becomes an object of criticism and outcast on the grounds of so called social and ethical standards. An individual – odd figure – becomes a victim of those who are very ordinary and remained unsuccessful figures in their lives. They become strong in a group and prove the dictum that 'majority carries the point.' In short, all the members of the group are jealous towards Miss Benare's qualities and the source of this jealousy is in inadequacies in them.

Obviously the play is feminist; woman oriented and about so called moral standards of society. Its apparent theme is exploitation and victimization of a woman in patriarchal society. The protagonist of the play, Miss LeelaBenare is exploited and victimized by all the on stage and off stage characters. She has been deserted long ago by her parents as a freak as they could not understand her. Her maternal uncle exploited her sexually in her teens. And, in her youth verging on adulthood, she has been sexually exploited and abandoned by Prof. Damle, a second time. This is the real life tragedy of Miss LeelaBenare. As though it is not enough, in the mock trial scene of the play (play within play), she is victimized by her colleagues, her co-actors in a drama troupe. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, a group of an amateur plan to stage a play in Mumbai suburb. One of their actors remains absent. They manage the situation by adjusting with the local person. A rehearsal starts and a mock-trial is arranged to make the local person understand the court procedure. In a mock-trial, the charge of infanticide is inflicted on Miss Benare. She is also one of the members of the actors' group. In the due course of time, the mock-trial turns against Miss Benare and her personal life reflects in it. Miss Benare had a love affair with Prof. Damle and she is now pregnant. In the mock-trial, Miss Benare becomes the object of the group and she is ruthlessly insulted and humiliated. Even the local youth Samant inadvertently becomes a party to the trap laid by her colleagues to victimize her. The horrifying side of the whole mock trial is that it is held only as an entertainment. Again and again the characters refer to the mock trial as mere rehearsal, mere fun. One wonders, if the rehearsal is of so much a cruel nature, how far the actual play exceed in callousness. None of her colleagues, except perhaps the local youth Samant, realized the seriousness of the emotional damage caused to her personality because of their cruel entertainment. All the seamy, pervert and dirty aspects of bourgeois mentality has been brought out during the trial scene. Her colleagues gloat over her discomfitures. They corner her and enjoy her hunting. So ShailajaWadikar says, “The theme of the play revolves round the idea of a game in which Benare who is on the offensive in the beginning, finds herself entrapped in the game towards the end of the play.” (Wadikar, 44) It appears that they voyeuristically enjoy her sexual escapades. All of them are unhappy, incomplete and unsuccessful in some way in their private lives. Tendulkar through Samant, symbolically, compares them with ‘old bolts’ and ‘they just won’t slide straight.’ They are old means old fashioned, representing rigid social conventions and not progressive. They trouble an individual like Miss Benare who is dynamic and progressive as indicated by Tendulkar.

Samant: These old bolts are all the same. They just won’t slide straight. And if the bolt strays out just a little bit, and you don’t pull it clean to one side, then

what happens? Shut the door – you have had it! Locked yourself in.  
(Tendulkar, 01)

‘*These old bolts*’ are presented by Tendulkar through Miss Benare’s mouth. She began with Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar following other,

Benare: Kashikar can’t take a step without a Prime Objective! Besides him, there’s Mrs. Hand that Rocks the Cradle. I mean Mrs. Kashikar. What an excellent housewife the poor woman is! A Real Hand that Rocks the Cradle type! But what’s the use? Mr. Prime Objective is tied up with uplifting the masses. And poor Hand that Rocks the Cradle has no Cradle to rock! (Tendulkar, 6)

And again she presents situation of both Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar. They have no child. Their life became boring. They adopted BaluRokde to overcome their present and future problems. Miss Benare criticises these people in the following words:

Benare: Mr. Kashikar and the Hand that Rocks the Cradle, in order that nothing should happen to either of them in their bare, bare-house and that they shouldn’t die of boredom! – gave shelter to a young boy. They educated him. Made him toil away. Made a slave out of him. His name’s Balu – BaluRokde. (Tendulkar, 6)

Benare goes on commenting another character – lawyer Sukhatme. She very precisely brings forth the knowledge and popularity of Sukhatme in ironical way:

Benare: Well we have an expert on the law. He’s such an authority on the subject, even a desperate client won’t go anywhere near him! He just sits alone in the barristers’ room at court, swatting flies with legal precedents! And in his tenement, he sits alone killing houseflies. (Tendulkar, 6)

She does not spare people like Punkshe those who have useless pride about their knowledge. Actually, they do not have knowledge but they make an air of having same.

Benare: And there’s a Hmm with us. Hmm Sci-en-tist! Inter-failed! And we have an Intellectual too. That means someone who prides himself on his book learning. But when there’s real – life problem, away he runs! Hides his head. (Tendulkar, 6)

Karnik is a pretender to modern theatre without any success on stage or in artistic circles either, whereas the local youth Mr. Samant is a simpleton. All of these characters are suffering from a sense of ennui and this makes them seek a thrilling entertainment in the discomfiture of LeelaBenare. Their private deprivations have made them disgruntled and they take a sadistic, perverse and unhealthy pleasure in her suffering. The depraved tastes of the sadist middle class society are exposed by Vijay Tendulkar during the mock trial scene. Miss LeelaBenare is exploited individually and then she is victimized and convicted by a group – a crowd. As an individual none of them dare face the protagonist because she is a very particular person. In her own words:

Benare: 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* behindhand 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, 3-4)

And, again

Benare:.... And, they (my children, pupils) adore me, too. My children will do anything for me....That's why people are jealous. Specially, the other teachers and the management. (Tendulkar, 4)

However, as a group they satisfy their wish to dominate her. This petty middle class mentality has been exposed by Tendulkar in the play. So "Tendulkar's plays manifest his strong dissatisfaction with the prevailing social order. They deal with miseries and sufferings caused by the cruel forces and conventions of society." (Wadikar, 39) The violence in the play is related to modern times, loneliness, notions of middle class morals, and hypocrisy like Gidhade. But it is different in many ways. First of all, the violence is not about rich or capitalists, secondly, it is not physical but it is mental cruelty and third difference is that it is the hunting of a lonely person by a group behaving savagely. But as an individual they are weak as Miss Benare told above. As MakarandSathe observes,

They form group because they are weak. They become strong by forming group. This happens in modern times because of two reasons – one for the benefit of self, one is deprived of what another is benefited, and second, more dangerous than the first one – that person is totally different than the group, for not following their so called ethics, not accompanying in hypocrisy, and keeping one's own individuality separately. (translated from Marathi) (Sathe, 932)

Because of the attack of the group, Benare becomes 'silent' rather she is made *silent* by ordering, '*Silence! The Court is in Session*'. She does is not revolt against the group. As far as the apparent theme of feminine exploitation is concerned, LeelaBenare as a woman protagonist serves to project this theme. However, Tendulkar appears to project larger theme of individual versus society, or victimization of an individual by the society in the play. One can use qualifying terms to both the nouns – individual and society. So MakarandSathe rightly says, "The struggle is individual versus social. (translated from Marathi)" (Sathe, 937) In the play, we see victimization of an unusual or exceptional or individual by the mediocre society or a group. If the qualifier 'exceptional' appears objectionable to some strict adherents of relativistic pseudo philosophers, we may choose the term 'odd'. Then the theme of the play may be stated as: 'hunting down of an odd personality by the society or a group' or 'a crowd of like-minded people having common interests'.

In every respect LeelaBenare is an 'individual' or 'odd' or 'uncommon' person in the group in which she happens to find her. She is lively, vivacious, full of energy, has a zest for life. We notice from the very beginning of the play her difference from the people who surround her. She has rushed to the place of dramatic performance leaving others far behind. Even Mr. Samant, their local guide notices this difference when he says: Samant: ...I'm not in the habit of walking so fast. You do set a very lively pace, very lively. (Tendulkar, 2)

What Samant says about walking himself and Benare can be taken as having symbolic meaning of her progression in life. Miss Benare is so fast i. e. so advance in life and ahead of social standards. All other people are traditional and conventional. They do not have capacity to be fast forward. Benare does not like this so she says: Benare: Why haven't they reached here yet? They always amble along. People should be brisk! (Tendulkar, 3)

She is brisk. She is a forward looking woman. All other people are not as fast as Miss Benare, rather they are reluctant in progress. People are comfortable in the company of like-minded group. They forgive their transgressions if these are common to all of them. However, they are eager to point out specks on an immaculate surface. If they are able to find a weak-spot



in an otherwise sturdy personality, they peck at it until it bleeds and festers. This is a peculiarly petty bourgeois mentality. LeelaBenare is different sort of personality. She carries the seed of life in her womb and she is ready to sacrifice everything to bring it up even though the laws of society prohibit her from doing her so on the grounds of immorality. As against her personality, all the other characters are defined in negative terms. Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar are childless. As Ponshe says, “Kashikar torments poor Rokde. Because he constantly suspects an entanglement between him and his wife. Because they have no children, you see...” (Silence! 62) Both of them have made life miserable for BaluRokde, their adopted son. BaluRokde says, “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)

Mr. Sukhatme is an unsuccessful lawyer. His practice is poor. So Benare says, “... he just sits in the barristers’ room playing patience - they say it’s well known that if you take your case to him, it’s jail for certain! – he just goes dumb before the judge....” (Tendulkar, 61-62). Ponshe pretends to be a scientist but he has failed in inter-science examination. Sukhatme comments about Ponshe, “The scientist in the witness-box! A pipe and all that! 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!” (Silence! 8) Benare’s judgment about Prof. Damle is applicable for all opportunistic men, “And we have an Intellectual too....But when there’s a real - life problem, away he runs! Hides his head. He’s not here today. Won’t be coming, either. He wouldn’t dare!” (Tendulkar, 6, 7) Only LeelaBehnare has the courage to face life and live enthusiastically to enjoy life. She expresses her ideas of living life, and accordingly she is doing the same.

Benare: We should laugh, we should play, we should sing! If we can and if they'll let us, we dance too. Should'thave any false modesty or dignity. Or care for anyone! (Tendulkar,8)

The other people have been unsuccessful in their lives and they have problems or they created problems. As a result, they cannot enjoy their lives as Benare does. These qualities of her personality actually make her an exceptional being. She represents an individual irrespective of gender. The only other woman character in the play, Mrs. Kashikar has no individuality. Her husband, Mr. Kashikar, takes all of her decisions for her. BaluRokde is an almost non-entity. The same can be said about all the remaining characters. They have a semblance of identity as a group. They are the components of the big and inhuman machinery called society. But as a separate individual they cease their identity. Thus, LeelaBenare's tragedy does not remain the tragedy of a woman. It becomes the tragedy of an 'exceptional' or 'odd' human being trapped in a mediocre social group. The group does not tolerate an 'exceptional' or 'odd' person. It hunts down the person who does not fit in the moral code framed by the larger but common group. The group has no other weapon against progressive woman like Benare. So they only rely on conventional and moral codes of conduct. Thus, LeelaBenare's exception and victimization becomes in a way victimization of an individual. In her last speech, LeelaBenare makes an eloquent appeal for the presentation of an individuality and privacy and sanctity of personal life.

Benare: Yes, I have a lot to say... for so many years, I haven't said a word. Chances came and chances went... But each time I shut my lips tight. I thought, no one will understand. No one can understand!...how stupid everyone around me, how childish, how silly they all seemed ... My private life is my own business. I'll decide what to do with myself, everyone should be able to! .... Everyone has a bent, a manner, an aim in life. What's anyone else to do with these? (Tendulkar, 72-73)

At the end of the play, Miss Benare sings the nursery rhymes where the parrot has lost her nest alike her: “Oh, my dear friend, what shall I say? Someone has stolen my nest away.” (Tendulkar, 78)

The stage directions tell us that her speech is not heard by the people to whom it is addressed. It usually happens in reality. She becomes a representative of all such 'individuals' who are victimized by society. She is Hans Anderson's *Ugly Ducklings*. Unfortunately, her transformation into a swan does not take place in the dramatic framework of Tendulkar's 'Silence! The Court is in Session.'

\* The title is derived from Miss Benare's tirade while she was explaining life. “ ... Life is not worthy of life. Hold an enquiry against life.” (Tendulkar, 73)

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