



## DEPICTION OF “SHE” IN TENDULKAR’S SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION

**G. SAILAJA**

Research Scholar  
Jawaharlal Nehru Technological  
University,  
Anantapur, (AP) INDIA

**DR. K. GOPAL REDDY**

Associate Professor of English and  
Heads the Department  
Sri Sai Baba National Degree & PG  
College (Autonomous),  
Anantapur. (AP) INDIA

**DR. V. B. CHITRA**

Associate Professor of English and  
Heads the Department  
Jawaharlal Nehru Technological  
University, Anantapur. (AP) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*Culture is a set of standards, customs, and beliefs which people believe in. It decides the attitude of human beings. It varies from society to society, community to community, and country to country. But it is the same to man and woman. It may also change according to the times. For Indians, it the most important one. People try their best to preserve the set standards. Unfortunately, men believe that they can violate the culture and do anything. But if a woman tries to live a life of her own, not violating the culture, they make her victim and speak volumes about culture. This sort of attitude is recurrent in Vijay Tendulkar’s Silence! The Court is in Session. The play skillfully depicts the predicament and vulnerability of “She” in an Indian society. It truly presents that the standard rules are set for women but not to men.*

*The present paper focuses on Tendulkar’s Leela Benare, the protagonist of Silence! The Court is in Session who becomes a victim of ruthless society’s set standards of culture and longs for true love breaking the cultural norms by having a relation with a married man without marriage. The paper also tries to analyze how she is isolated and made the victim to a cruel game cunningly planned by her co-actors.*

### INTRODUCTION

**G. SAILAJA**

**DR. V. B. CHITRA**

**DR. K. GOPAL REDDY**

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Culture is a set of standards, customs, and beliefs which people believe in. It decides the attitude of human beings. It varies from society to society, community to community, and country to country. But it is the same to man and woman. It may also change according to the times. For Indians, it is the most important one. People try their best to preserve those set standards. Unfortunately, men believe that they can violate the culture and do anything. But if a woman tries to live a life of her own, not violating the culture, they make her victim and speak volumes about culture. This sort of attitude is recurrent in Ms. Leela Benare, the protagonist of Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*.<sup>1</sup>

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (1928-2008) is one of the significant Indian playwrights of the post-independence era who made an effort to transcend the cultural boundaries of Maharashtra into a work of art. He is an icon of the country's vernacular theatre. Critics called him 'the angry young man of Marathi theatre.' He is a literary essayist, screen and television writer, political journalist, and social commentator. His rich literary contribution includes thirty full-length plays, twenty-five biographies, and nineteen award-winning films, several of which have become classics of modern Indian theatre. His plays, one act-plays, short stories, and movie scripts are about controversial social themes which include violence, poverty, women's rights, and corruption. They derived inspiration from real-life incidents or social upheavals, which provide clear light on harsh realities. Though he has written many works, the most critically acclaimed plays through which he has brought modernism to Marathi drama and stage are *Shatata! Court Chalu Aahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Gidhade*, *Kamala*, and *Sakharam Binder*. His contribution to Indian English drama in general and to Marathi literature in particular has kept him ahead of contemporary writers and an inspirational force to many modern writers. Famous writers like Mahesh Elkunchvar, Satish Alekar accept that their writing is influenced by Vijay Tendulkar. V.S. Naipaul, the 2001 Nobel Laureate in English, has called him "India's best playwright"<sup>2</sup> and Shailaja Wadikar called him "one of the pioneers of New Drama in the post-independence India."<sup>3</sup>

Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a landmark in the annals of Indian drama in English. It was written based on a 1956 short story, "Die Panne" (Traps) by Friedrich Durrenmat, Swedish playwright. The play skillfully depicts the predicament and vulnerability of "She" in an Indian society. It truly presents the standard rules that are set for women but not to men. It deals with the deep seated instinct of violence against a lonely woman and sexual compulsions that lie beneath respectable exteriors. It is also about the isolation of the individual and the failure of human relations as a result of man's inherent violent attitude towards fellowmen. Nirupa Rani remarks thus:



*Using mock-element, theatrical edge and making the structure revolve round the idea of a game and being tight-lipped about legal remedies for social problems and unwholesome comments on human nature Tendulkar commented on the lack of self-knowledge and resources to self-justification which is distinctive trait of the present day society.<sup>4</sup>*

The play begins in an empty hall and Benare's entry on the stage suggests some significance. The door through which she enters resembles the problems of the play. She got hurt by the door. Her finger was caught in the bolt. She was deceived by her uncle in her teens. That was the first shock to Benare. When Samant enquires her about the door and how she got hurt, she says, "It is nothing. Nothing at all. It's just a habit with me" (Act One, 55). These words of Benare clearly convey that she got hurt many a time and she is habituated to them. The door presents the cultural norms of the society which try to bind her freedom and Benare can't handle them properly.

The story runs in three acts and each act is structured very well with the other. In Act One, one sees a mock trial to be staged by an amateur theatre group from Bombay in the Community Hall of a distant suburb. The scheduled subject is the prosecution of President Johnson of the US for the production of atomic weapons. But the playwrights found that they have assembled a little too early. So they play with the idea of staging an unrehearsed mock trial with one of their groups as the accused to be prosecuted on some trumped-up charge.

In Act Two, all the participants in the mock trial play their roles of Judge Counsel over the prosecution and defence witness. Benare, the accused makes rapid digs at her colleagues. It ends with the trap of Benare. While Ibsen's Nora manages to leave the room with a bang on the door thereby creating a stir in the whole of Europe, Benare unfortunately stands by the door with her back to the others. Soon she is asked to come to the witness box.

In Act Three, the mock games becomes a regular game with Benare as the trapped victim. The hunters launch a concerted attack upon her and derive pleasure from it. They expose her private life with evidences. She realizes that the whole society is out to punish her for deviating from the moral norms. Benare finally breaks down and confesses, in her long soliloquy, that she has been seduced by her uncle first, and later by Professor Damle, an intellectual, whom she has worshipped. One can see the mental agony of Benare in the following lines:

*Storms raged one after another about my throat. And there was a wail like death in my heart. But each time I shut my lips tight. I thought no one will understand. No one can understand! (Act Three, 116)*



She further says that she has a will of her own to decide things and to act upon. But the group never listens to her words. The mock-judge pronounces the final savage judgment that the baby would be destroyed in the womb itself. When Benare collapses sobbing, others exclaim that it is just a 'joke' and a 'game' which she has taken really to heart.

Ms. Leela Benare, the protagonist in Tendulkar's *magnum opus Silence! The Court is in Session*, is an independent working woman who longs for true love. She loves life and is full of spirit. She is extremely happy, sometimes proud, about her performance as a teacher. She is completely devoted to her profession. She gains popularity that leads to the envy of her colleagues and the management at school. The only thing that always pricks her mind is that she is a woman who should be bound to the laid rules and adopt the culture. Yet she aspires to fulfill her desires. She doesn't feel ashamed of her instincts. So, she emerges as a different character from others in the play.

Leela Benare is tortured purposefully by male characters and sometimes even by female characters. She, in her quest to escape from the clutches in which she is put, goes to the extent of breaking the cultural norms by maintaining a relationship with a married man without marrying him. As a result, she becomes a victim to society's ruthless set standards of culture. She is isolated and made the victim of a cruel game, cunningly planned by her co-actors. Thus, the fellow-actors accuse her, prosecute her, and subject her to terrible mental agony. Arundhati Banerjee rightly points out that,

*In the persecution of this helpless woman, a fierce psychological violence becomes evident. The latent sadism of the characters, of Sukhatme, of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, of Ponkshe, Karnik or even Rokde, surfaces during the process of the trial.*<sup>4</sup>

Tendulkar has put Benare's character on a large canvas of society where people still stick to the age old traditions. Unlike the others, she is a modern woman with individuality. Unfortunately, in our society that is primarily patriarchal, rules are male prejudiced. A woman should not have any individuality whereas a man can. The society also believes that standards and rules are set for women but not for men. As a result, Vijay Tendulkar skillfully presents the predicament and vulnerability of an Indian woman in this play.

Being outspoken and conventional, Benare is considered a woman of questionable character. Her journey from a woman to an individual is clearly brought out in the mock trial of the play. Her co-actors are well aware of real story that they are going to enact. But Benare doesn't know that. Yet none of them want to really approach Benare's problem in a humane manner or treat her with dignity. The reason for this is that they are jealous of Benare who is

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successful in her career. They do not approve of her unconventional behavior. They gang up against her and hurt her feelings deeply by making her private affairs public. Mrs. Shirish Pai's poem which Benare recites at the school for her children succinctly gives us the plight of her own. To quote,

*Our feet tread on upon unknown  
And dangerous pathways evermore. ...  
And the wound that's born to bleed  
Bleeds on for ever, faithfully.  
There is a battle sometimes, where  
Defeat is destined as the end. (Act One, 63)*

This poem serves as a metaphor that offers the mental state of this great heroine. The poem is equally equivalent to what Derrida mentions as *glassopoeia*, a state in which meaning is yet to be born. At the end of the trial Benare is given an opportunity to say something in her defence. She breaks her silence and asserts that she cannot tolerate others meddling with her life. She has a will of her own to decide things and to act upon. She like Ibsen's Nora tries to defend her rights and independence of mind. But the group never listens to her words. The mock-judge pronounces the final savage judgment that "Marriage is the very foundation of our society's stability. Motherhood must be sacred and pure. This court takes a serious view of your attempt to dynamite all this. ... And, what is more, the arrogance with which you conducted yourself in society, having done all these things, that arrogance is the most unforgivable thing of all. Criminals and sinners should know their place" (Act Three, 118-119).

Mr. Kashikar, who acts as a Judge in the mock-trial, is an embodiment of hypocrisy. He always claims to be a social worker who works hard for the development of society. But in reality he is not. This is evident by the way he treats his wife. He justifies his selection of the crime for the mock-trial by saying thus:

*Did you notice, also, Sukhatme, that this charge is important from the society point of view? The question of infanticide is one of great social significance. That's why I deliberately picked it. We consider society's best interests in all we do. Come on, Miss Benare. (Act Two, 76)*

But the actual intention behind selection of this charge is to humiliate Miss Benare.

Though the play was produced in 1967, it has its relevance even today. Nothing has changed much in the society. People still question and judge a woman's character, the way she



behaves, the way she dresses herself, and so on. There are few people who are putting their efforts to enlighten women and focus their problems by making movies.

*Pink* (court-room drama film) is such best example in which three women are brought to the trail and their character is questioned based on their behaviour and appearance. It is a powerful statement on the existing feudal mindset of a majority of India, where men and women are judged by different yardstick. It is about Meenal, Falak, and Andrea, the three middle-class normal working girls. They meet three men who take them for dinner. At the resort, Meenal hits Rajveer when he tries to molest and outrage her modesty. The case comes for the trail where umpteen questioned are hurled on the three women based on their behaviour.

Like Benare in the mock trial, the three girls become victims in the hands of the society which set standards for women. A safety manual will be there for women that they shouldn't go alone with a stranger and they should never laugh while talking. This kind of behaviour shows that 'she is a woman of questionable character.' Rajveer, the culprit says they gave 'Hints' to him by laughing and touching. He says thus:

*Hass hass ke bath karraheethi*

*Touch karke bath karraheethi*

*Acche ghar ki ladkiya parties me nahee jathi.*

From the above lines, it is clear that Rajveer is the representative of the feudal mentality of the Indian society who finds fault with women if they talk freely. But this rule is not applicable to men. From the girls' point of view, they are normal. This gives the scope to criticize the views of the society where women are stereotyped as spoilt, if they come home late, if they move out of their home, want to be independent, if they drink, if they giggle and so on, but none of these apply to men.

The same thing happens with Leela Benare in the mock trial of the play. She remains completely silent during the dissection of her personal life by her fellow actors. Even if she tries to speak, she is silenced by them, because they feel that she is an individual who moves freely with others irrespective of men and women. But this free nature is criticized by the society. None of them is ready to accept Benare's new concept of life. Mrs. Kashikar says, Free! Free! She's free all right – in everything! Should there be no limit to how freely a woman can behave with a man? An unmarried woman? No matter how well she knows him? Look how loudly she laughs? How she sings, dances, cracks jokes? And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out! (Act Three, 100)



In both the cases the society finds fault with the women. But what about the men. In the play, Leela Benare is seduced first by her maternal uncle. When she asks him to marry her, he avoids the responsibility in the name of customs. Prof. Damle, a Professor at a University, acknowledges Benare only for her sexual attraction but not for her character or intelligence. When she makes a plea to marry her, he escapes himself to protect his honour. Everybody knows that he is the main cause for her suffering. His appearance during the trial as merely a witness whereas Benare remains the prime accused as the unwed pregnancy of his illegitimate child depicts his nature. When it comes to punishment only Benare has to receive it. Here, Tendulkar exposes dual standards of self-centered male characters. He tries to show to the society that the male characters are custom conscious only when it helps them.

Thus, the contemporary Indian society, with its roots grounded firmly in traditions and culture can't allow the birth of a child without wedlock. So, Benare is accused of immorality and sin. Against all such charges Mr. Kashikar announces his judgment.

Neither you nor anyone should ever do anything like this again. No memento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore, this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed. (Act Three, 119)

Against all such charges Miss Benare tries to defend herself and it is represented through her long soliloquy, which has become famous in the history of contemporary Marathi theatre and stirred women in the country. She appeals the audience to view her situation from a different perspective. In spite of her appeals, they do not show any sympathy and pass the judgment. In the end, she struggles to move but cannot. The play ends with a song of a grieving sparrow whose secure world has been destroyed by predators.

Benare's character motivates us to struggle and fight the situations, however harsh they may be. She never loses her spirit till the end. She decides to give birth to the child against the norms of the society. Though the mock-court gives a judgment that the child in her womb shall be destroyed, she opposes it and says that she won't let it happen. She asserts her right to give birth to the child, the product of the ruined union, and her right to live a life in her own way. She says,

*I'll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to! That can't be anyone else's business; understand? Everyone has a bent, a manner, an aim in life. What's anyone else to do with these? (Act Three, 117)*

Thus, Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* interplays the woman's psyche through the character of Leela Benare. It powerfully depicts how "She" is treated by men in the



society and how moral codes and restrictions restrict women from leading a happy life of her own.

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