



SILENCE ! THE COURT IS IN SESSION: A CANDID SCRUTINY OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Silence! The court is in session, Tendulkar got inspiration from a real life incident. The play is a social satire with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society. A group of artist goes to a town to perform a play. A rehearsal of the play in which there is a mock trial is arranged. In this mock trial, the private life of Leela Benare, the plays protagonist is revealed and publicly discussed. The theme of the play revolves round the idea of a game the mock court trial in which Benare, who is on the offensive in the beginning, finds herself entrapped in the game towards the end of the play. It is the presentation of Silence! The Court is in Session that Tendulkar is recognized as a rebel against society. Outwardly, the play moves around the theme of love, marriage and sex. But the ideas expressed here are anti-romantic and anti-establishment. Through the rehearsal of the play, which is ostensibly a game, Tendulkar exposes the double standards of our society.

Keywords: - Barbarism, Victimized, Humanitarian, Mock -trial.

INTRODUCTION

Tendulkar's plays express his dislike for hypocrisy, vulgarity, barbarism, Superfacility, narrow-mindedness, corruption, duplicity and treachery. While depicting the drawbacks and vices of both and individual and society, the playwright's humanitarian approach and his commitment to human values are clearly perceptible. They create furor in society, posing new challenges and demanding new morality.

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Silence! The court is in session is the first Tendulkar play to Become part of new Indian Drama phenomena of the sixties and the first significant modern Indian play in any language to center on woman as protagonist and victim.

For silence! The court is in session Tendulkar, got inspiration from a real life incident. He met an amateur group that was on its way to stage a mock trial in vile-parle, a suburb of Mumbai. While overhearing, the artiest conversation, the outline of the play began to take shape in his mind, and the ultimate result of it was the birth of great play. The original Marathi play was written for the Rangayan at the instance of Arvind and Sulbha Deshpande in 1967, and was first performed in its English version in 1971, in Chennai, and was directed by Ammu Matthew.

The story and the plot

The play is a social satire with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society. The brief outline of the story goes thus ; a group of artist goes to a town to perform a play. A rehearsal of the play in which there is a mock trial is arranged. In this mock trial, the private life of LeelaBenare, the plays protagonist is revealed and publicly discussed. Here, Tendulkar present a world apparently dominated by male chauvinists. However, the dramatic action revolve round the character of Benare with great compassion and understanding while pitting her against the men who are selfish, hypocritical, and brutally ambitious. LeelaBenare, who is rebellious and assertive, is a school teacher. She performs the duty as a teacher very sincerely and command love and respect of her pupils. She is also an enlightened amateur artist. So, accept the membership of the amateur theatre group. The other members of the group are the Washikars, BaluRokade, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Karnik, Prof. Damle and Rowte who belong to the urban middle class of Mumbai.

All the character except LeelaBenare are the representative of the fundamentally orthodox society. The theatre group is a “Miniscule cross-section of middle-representative of its different sub-strata. Their characters, dialogues gesture and even mannerisms reflect their petty, circumscribed existence.” Frustrated and angry as they are in their individuals lives, they go to the extent of maligning their companion also, for they are malicious and jealous in attitude toward their fellow-being.

Leela Benare, with her zeal and zest for life, is totally different happiness with others but hardly. Succeed in doing so. Her companions fail to appreciate her jovial, generous nature. Benare, who is far different from others, is isolated. The co-authors cunningly arrange a cruel game in the form of a mock-trial. She then becomes a target of their gossip and falls a victim

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ultimately to character assassination at their instance. During the proceedings of the mock-court, her companions deliberately reveal her illicit love affair with Prof. Damle, a married man. The love affair ultimately results in her pregnancy. Prof. Damle, however, is significantly absent at the time of rehearsal the remarks in the book read by Samant, which are supposed to be Damle's addressed to Benare, implicitly throw light on the culprit's escapist tendency: "where you should go is entirely your problem. I feel great sympathy for you. But I can do nothing. I must protect my reputation." (92).

The court also summons Damle just as a witness, and not as an offender. Benare is made the prime accused for having pregnancy before marriage. The co-actors go on consoling her that the mock-trial is arranged used for rehearsal. But the accusation used for this so-called rehearsal that of infanticide (to be more accurate, foeticide) turns into verdict at the end. Through this game, they successfully resort to dissecting Miss Benare's character and thereby unearth her past and aggress upon her private life, for "she is held guilty by the court that asks the school authorities to dismiss her from the job, and further orders that the babe in her womb be destroyed."

The play within a play

Silence! The court is in session is a social satire on the male dominated society, in which "a woman can neither get a sympathetic response nor win a man to give legitimacy to her child." The theme of the play thus revolves round the idea of a game the mock court trial in which Benare, who is on the offensive in the beginning, finds herself entrapped in the game towards the end of the play.

The play begins with a group of artists, planning to stage a play in a village. A rehearsal is arranged to acquaint Samant, a local chap, with the court procedure. At the beginning of the mock-trial, Benare is accused of the charge of infanticide. Surprisingly, at the end, this fake charge turns into a verdict into a punishment..this very rehearsal of the mock-trial takes a serious turn as the co-actors arrange it cunningly to discuss and dissect the private life of Benare, which has been full of excitement since she was in her teens. Karnik's and Ponshe's remarks in this matter are full of word-play.

Karnik: The crime itself is imaginary. What more do you want? It's all imaginary... That's what it is .

Ponshe: Only the accused is real. (90)



In the so-called game, her extramarital relationship with Prof. Damle stands exposed. All the male-members, Prof. Damle, Mr. Rawte and her maternal uncle who are responsible for her awkward humiliating situation are significantly absent at the time of trial.

Benare, a school-teacher, is sincere in her teaching work and hence, is favourite with her pupils. She also works in the amateur theatre group along with Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, BaluRokde, Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Karnik, Prof. Damle and Mr. Rawte. She is the protagonist of the play. It is in the light of her remarks that audience studies other characters. All the characters, except samant, fall to achieve their most cherished goals of life. They cannot understand, appreciate and share in the joy of others. Instead they seek a vicious pleasure in making others unhappy. In their verbal onslaught on Benare, who is, by nature, a jolly teacher, their sadist tendencies come to the surface.

All the members in the group, including Mrs. Kashikar, come together to expose the private life of Benare. In their malicious and spiteful attitude towards Miss Benare, their fellow companion one notices the inferiority complex reflected in their frustration and repressed desires. However, they themselves are not united and share nothing but hatred for one another. While calling upon his first witness, Mr. Ponkshe, Sukhatme remarks, "My first witness is the world famous scientist Mr. Gopal Ponkshe. Well Ponkshe, are you happy? I have suddenly prompted you to world fame, eh?" (80)

During the mock-trial, Sukhatme works both as a public prosecutor and as a defence counsel. As a public prosecutor, he conducts the case very cunningly and illustrates his point against Benare emphatically. But all his enthusiasm disappears as soon as he works as a defence counsel. The witnesses for Benare are chosen from the absent members of the group. Benare is punished severely for her present conduct, which, in her companions view, is licentious and also for her past life, which is besmeared with sin.

The character of Benare symbolizes simplicity, innocence and straight-forwardness and the characters of her fellow-companions symbolize meanness, crookedness and cruelty. Her tragedy reveals the fact that in the male-dominated society. Woman's innocence is punished and man's violence goes scot-free. That is why Prof. Damle, despite the fact that he wholly disowns his responsibility, is summoned merely as a witness while.

Benare remains the prime accused, principally because contemporary Indian society, with all its roots grounded firmly in reactionary ideas, cannot allow the birth of a child out of (i.e. outside) wedlock.



The play within the play, which is just a rehearsal for Benare's fellow-companions, reveals the basic hypocrisy and double standards on which our society rests. What Simone de Beauvoir states in her book. The second sex seems quite justified in this connection:

humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him,... she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Absolute – She is the other.

An Individual Vs a Group

Benare is isolated and made a victim of the game cunningly arranged by her cofactors. Very easily they manage to victimize her since she has no backing or support. Twice she is cheated by her loving male-companions (i.e. once, by her maternal uncle and the other time by Prof. Damle), for they love just her body, and not her mind.

Tendulkar, here, throws light on the evil tendencies such as crookedness, cruelty, violence, that are inherent in human nature. The cross-section of society depicted in the play is white-collar middle class. All the cofactors come together to while away their free time. However, these educated civilized people become aggressive and violent against their fellow-companion and that too, a female and entertain themselves at the cost of her honour and dignity. Benare suffers at their hands for the offence she has not committed. So, she bursts out: "These are 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." (117)

Benare has her highest moments of happiness, twice in her life, once with her maternal uncle and the other time with Prof. Damle. Having enjoyed "a moment so beautiful, so blissful, so near to heaven!" (118), both of them leave her to her fate. So, she suffers the painful consequence of it. They treat her as though she were a use-and-throw object. Besides, she is, further, ill treated and made an object of ridicule by her companions who pose that they are the upholders of the moral values of society.

Benare has a lot to say by way of a plea. But whether she is allowed to put it in words or not remains a mystery. Arundhati Banerjee points out:

Leela Benare's defence of herself against the onslaught of the upholders of social norms in a long soliloquy, has become famous in the history of contemporary Marathi theatre. It is important to note here that Tendulkar leaves us in doubt as to whether or not Benare at all delivers the soliloquy,

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thus, suggesting that in all probability what she has to say for herself is swallowed up by the silence imposed upon her by the authorities. 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.

What Tendulkar explores in the play are the evil tendencies that have taken roots in the so-called modern, cultural society. Benare offers to marry any of her companions but none comes forth to accept her proposal. On the contrary, she is denied both, the right of living (as she is dismissed from her job) and the right of becoming a mother (as the sentence passed on her is to the effect that the babe in her womb must be destroyed). Her fellow-companions give lectures on the dignity of woman and motherhood but they do not hesitate in the least to inflict shame and indignity on her. Benare's tragedy reveals the fact that too much of innocence is unpardonable even in the most sophisticated, civilized section of the society. L. S. Deshpande who has worked on the translation study of the play, puts it succinctly thus:

The punishment meted out to Miss Benare speaks volumes of the ways of our so-called cultured society. The story of Miss Benare's innocence is a long drawn-out tale of woman's suffering at the hands of man. As usual, the man is left scot-free and the woman is made a scapegoat by all those around her. Needless to add, however, that all this is just a play and hence not to be taken seriously.

The height of the irony lies in the final utterance of the play :

"The show must go on!" exposing the moral and intellectual snobbery of the white collar, educated middle class Indian's.

Miss Benare, a modern, educated, economically independent woman is capable of carrying out her responsibility, but her co-actors fail to appreciate anything good about her. She is punished severely for the crime she has not committed. Prof. Damle, her lover- turned-culprit, who is equally responsible for Benare's so-called crime of unmarried motherhood, goes unnoticed, unquestioned, and unpunished.

The soliloquy, which occurs towards the end of the play, throws light on the oppressive nature of Indian society. Women have had a lot to say for centuries, but their voice has always remained suppressed either by their female/male counterparts or by the society at large. Miss Benare has been duped first by her maternal uncle and later by Prof. Damle. It



shows that men are always ready to enjoy sex with their women but refuse to face its ultimate consequences afterwards.

The presentation of the soliloquy in the actual performance is the most appropriate one. Miss Benare wants to express the innermost thoughts about herself and the world around. But everyone turns a deaf ear to what she says. So, in the actual performance of the play, Benare's mind and thoughts are not vocalized. She remains speechless. The playwright symbolically suggests the same through the focus of the blue light, cast around her silent standing posture.

The protagonist Benare: A New Woman

Benare is a young girl of character. She embodies love innocence, and sincerity. Although life offers her nothing but grief, she is optimistic and has a positive attitude towards life. She loves everything, which she is in possession of, viz, her babe, her profession, her pupils, her male- companions, etc, without expecting anything in return. She bears no grudge even against the man who disowns the responsibility of being the father of her babe. Being unaware of the indifference and cruelty of the world, she dreams, almost romantically : “He must have mother---- a father to call his own ----a house – to be looked after- he must have a good name!” (118)

Leela Benara, a modern, educated woman, is capable of protecting herself and her child though her male- companion refused to accept the responsibility. She dreams of the child with full parental authority and a good name. however, her dreams are not realized and all her hopes stand frustrated. The public discussion of her private life is not just relished by her co-actors, but she has also been entrapped in the mock-trial that becomes a cruel, cunning game. Thus, she is punished ruthlessly for the crime she has not committed.

The inability and complete failure on the part of Benare's co-actors in achieving the desired goal vander them all frustrated and violent. In their verbal assault on a helpless woman, their sadist tendencies are clearly noticeable. The audience feels profound sympathy for Miss Benare despite her unpardonable lapses. Likewise, Benare's persecutors create in audience's minds the mixed feelings of antipathy, sympathy and pathos for themselves.

What Tendulkar criticizes in the play is the man-centered world where women have been vicimised from centuries together. That is why Benare is punished without the least compassion, and Prof. Damle goes un enquired even though he is the father of a child outside wedlock. L. S. Deshpande states :



The play that treats of the problem of unmarried motherhood is conceived as a “game” in more than one sense. Mock-seriousness pervades the whole play. It is a day-time rehearsal of a mock-trial play to be performed at night. Miss Benare an unmarried grown-up woman, is the victim of the game in the midst of the great daughter banter and cordiality. What begins, at the outset, as partly a conjecture and partly a hearsay, comes out, in the final analysis, as the gravest and the most unpredictable truth about the woman’s private life. Finally, comes the unkindest cut of all the punishment that the body in her womb be killed i.e., foeticide(which is, ironically enough, a crime in itself), meted out to Miss Benare.

The play is a new wave play and as such marks a sharp break with the tradition of the mainstream Marathi plays in respect of subject matter and mode of presentation. According to Chandrashekhar Barve:

This is not a play about the cornering of Benare, nor about the cornered Benare. In fact the dramatic element in it is derived from the situation in which the “being” of Benare is engulfed by the social existence of her individually. She tries to express her ego openly and freely; and finally, it is throttled, Life is something like nothingness- these crazy words of Benare are a good comment on the nothingness of our being.

The character of Benare, the play’s protagonist, symbolizes a modern educated, but helpless woman in contemporary Indian society. She raises several questions about-love, sex, marriage and established moral values. Her long Soliloquy in self-defence reveals that the voice of protest of a simple, innocent woman is always submerged in the male-dominated society.

The play’s Message

It is with the presentation of silence! The court is in session that Tendulkar is recognized as a rebel against society. Outwardly, the play moves around the theme of love, marriage and sex. But the ideas expressed here are anti-romantic and anti-establishment. The play points out (particularly, Benare’s long speech) that neither there is any sin nor any goodness in the society around. Man should disown the established norms and values and move towards a new humanitarian order. What is important in life is one’s feeling, one’s sincerely or integrity. If the life lived is authentic. Benare is humiliated by her co-actors for her unmarried motherhood. Still audience’s sympathy goes with her for she is by nature, loving and loved.



Benare's innocence is punished very severely punished by her fellow-companions cruelty and vulgarity.

The play is a satire on social as well as on legal justice. Miss Benare is held guilty on the basis of witnesses only. So, the play obliquely suggests that the present-day justice is just a mockery. Throughout the rehearsal of a mock-trial, Benare's co-actors try to console her by telling that they are only joking with her. The mental agony she suffers is in no way less severe than the legal punishment. She is punished harshly, even disproportionately, and Prof. Damle, the real culprit goes scot-free. Contemporary Indian society is still male-dominated, where women are born to suffer. The injustice projected in the play will go on repeating itself in actual life until this "man-centred" world becomes "a human-centred world".

Benare's soliloquy becomes very famous in the Contemporary Indian theatre. However, the question whether it is a soliloquy in self defence or a pantomime of symbolic gestures remains unsolved, for whatever she intends to say in her plea is swallowed up by the silence imposed upon her by the court and also by the society at large. During the court proceedings, many a time her denials and objections are seen drowned by the judge's cry "Silence, Silence, the court is in session" and also with the "banging of the gavel".

Tendulkar here throws light on the inherent wickedness of human nature that neither allows anybody to be happy with life nor sees and endures others being happy. Benare's companions are themselves dissatisfied with life as they fail to achieve their desired aims in their individual lives. Sukhatme fails to be a successful lawyer, Karnik to be a successful artist and Ponshe to be a scientist. Rokde fails to earn his independent livelihood and Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar are without a child. Through their on slaught on a helpless woman, Tendulkar throws light on their inner sense of failure and frustration. So, the violence that the dramatist pours in words here is psychological. Benare offers to marry any of her companion but none comes forth to accept her proposal. The question is: Who is going to marry a girl with a babe in her womb conceived by one of their fellow-companions? What is more striking is that she is denied both, the right of living (as she is dismissed from her job) and the right of becoming a mother (as the babe in her womb has to be destroyed, for that is the sentence passed on her).

Through the rehearsal of the play, which is ostensity a game. Tendulkar exposes the double standards of our society. Benare is made a scapegoat and Prof. Damle is allowed to go scot-free quit surprisingly. During the trial, he is summoned just as a witness while Benare becomes the prime accused. She is not only blamed but humiliated also by her own companions. "The very men who give lectures on the dignity of women and motherhood are responsible for inflicting shame and indignity on her". Moreover, Benare appears to be the



victim of circumstances. In the depiction of the characters such as Prof. Damle and maternal uncle of Benare, the playwright exposes the excessive sexual lust of her male-counterparts. The tragedy of Benare bears evidence to the fact that in Indian society a mistaken, innocent woman becomes helpless and suffers humiliation double: firstly, physically on a personal level and then mentally on a public level. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes: "Women have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received."

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