

Repression and Resistance in Indian Middle Class Society: An Analysis

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Abstract

Women's marginalisation and oppression in the patriarchal social set-up has been the primary concern of many Indian English novelists, dramatists, and poets. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Manju Kapoor, Kamala Das depict the pain and anguish of women and bring out their struggle for identity as a wife, mother and most importantly as a human being in the middle class Indian society. Vijay Tendulkar, a famous Indian playwright, in his play *Silence! The Court is in Session* also brings out the repression and resistance of an educated woman in name of societal norms and moralities. The play exposes the hypocrisy of the middle class society and ironically reveals the reality of 'the cultured men of the 20th century'. The issue of women's vulnerability in our society has been highlighted through Benare, the protagonist. She represents thousands of women who face discrimination inside and outside their homes, at workplace, in society and are specifically targeted due to the narrow mindset of the contemporary middle class. The paper attempts to bring out the struggle and resistance of the protagonist against the societal norms and exposes the hollowness of the middle class moralities. An attempt has also been made to examine several pertinent issues such as rights of women, meaning/importance of freedom for a woman in a tradition bound patriarchal society, institution of marriage for a respectable life etc. Further, the connotation of the word 'Silence' has been explored.

Keywords: Silence, Repression, Resistance, identity

Vijay Tendulkar, a renowned playwright of the 20th century,

presents the position of women in the contemporary modern society in his works. Woman's struggle for identity as a wife, mother and the most importantly as a human being forms the major concern of many of his plays. *Silence! The Court is in Session* is the first Tendulkar's play in which he chooses a woman as protagonist. It is set during the transitional time in India when women started entering the workforce but society at large still held traditional views of gender roles. The play brought criticism for Tendulkar and he "was marked out as a rebel against the established values of a fundamental orthodox society." (Kaushal, 212) It is a three act play. The play's protagonist Leela Benare, an unmarried teacher in her early thirties, is deeply committed to her job and commands love and respect of all her pupils. She is a sincere worker and professionally popular. At the beginning, the reader finds her as a self-assertive lady, a freedom loving and independent woman. She is also an activist being a member of the amateur theatre group called "The sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association". (Adarkar, 8) The other members of this amateur theatre are the Kashikars, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Karnik, Professor Damle and Rawte, who all belong to the urban middle class of Bombay. Through Benare, the writer brings out the discrimination against the marginalized section and criticises the patriarchal structure of Indian society where even an economically educated woman has to face disrespect and criticism. The entire structure is steeped in irony. Benare's decision to live freely is considered as "terrible crime" (101) for which there is no forgiveness. It has been considered that she has attempted 'to dynamite' the social fabric, 'society's stability' by her immoral behaviour, and has endangered tomorrow's society by her misconduct. Her silent gaze, getting stiff/tense and finally sitting 'like a block of stone', drained of colour and totally desolate - convey the mental torture and humiliation she passes through. Before the beginning of the mock trial, she is vocal, self-confident, carefree, singing and humming-commenting on the behaviour of other colleagues. She rejects the boundaries/ limitations that are set for a woman. To quote, "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". She struggles to find a path for herself and her unborn child. But as the play proceeds, she remains the prime accused as the unwed mother of Damle's illegitimate child. She is alleged to have seduced every male present in the group.

What is taking place is supposed to be a mock trial involving fictional charges of an uncommitted crime against an accused woman, portrayed by Leela Benare, but fiction blurs with reality as Benare finds her character and actions actually being put on trial. "What began as a game has evolved into a hunt. Benare is the quarry and the group-accuser and judge-rolled into one . . . There is no mention of the 'intellectual' who abandoned her, the absent Damle" (Introduction, vii). The mock-trial, carried through a light-hearted atmosphere in the beginning slowly becomes a targeted show as her personal life is exposed, discussed and dissected openly and she is pinned down in the name of social justice and moral code. To quote Sukhatme, "But the accused has committed a far more serious crime. I mean unmarried motherhood. If it is encouraged, there will be no such thing left as the institution of marriage. Immorality will flourish. Before our eyes, our beautiful dream of a society governed by tradition will crumble into dust" (100).

Benare has tried to live within the social fabric as she understands how important it is to give her child a father's name. She understands the stigma both she and her child will face if it is born without a father and is worried about how to move forward all alone. But she becomes the target of her own colleagues. The reader knows how she falls at the feet of Samant begging to get marry to anyone. She also begged Ponkshe and Rokde to marry her and help her raise her child, but was rejected. No one is sincere for her, nor anyone tries to understand her emotions and feelings. Over the course of trial, her colleagues take the opportunity to insult what they see as her loose, immoral, progressive lifestyle. Her professional/personal life is intentionally inter-mingled and she is maliciously hurt. In the court, Ponkshe tries to expose her by revealing his private talk with her in which she expressed her willingness of getting married to him and her intention to bring up the child, 'falling at his feet'. Karnik reveals her attempt for suicide

once before for having an immoral relationship with her uncle in childhood. Even the judge, Kashikar, setting aside the tradition of the court, himself comes to the witness box to give evidence against her and narrates an incident when recently on his visit to the famous leader Nanasahab Shinde, he overheard the conversation in the next room and made a guess that too '100% certain' that the voice was that of Benare who wanted Shinde to drop an enquiry against her. Rokde and Ponkshe as witness keep on discussing openly what was shared privately by Benare and use it to further humiliate her, demoralize her.

Benare towards the end of Act two, sensing the plot against her, strongly reacts and threatens to go away and smash up all. She painfully says, "You've all deliberately ganged up on me! You've plotted against me!"(65). There are tears in her eyes, her voice is choked and she feels agitated. But the trial continues, with Karnik, Samant, Mrs. Kashikar, together enjoying her humiliation with a peculiar joy. Her effort to leave that place, her banging on the door indicates that she is mouse trapped. It is noteworthy that in Act III, Benare speaks only 5-6 dialogues besides the final long monologue that she utters towards the end. The short dialogues 'That's is lie!. 'No! You promised, Ponkshe ! 'Ponkshe, 'Just you tell it and you'll see, Ponkshe,' - only reveal her helplessness against the planned game. Sukhatme assuming both the roles as lawyer of the prosecution and the defence, Kashikar coming to the witness box to give an important evidence against the accused, Mrs. Kashikar dragging her to the dock, Ponkshe revealing publically what once was shared with him as a friend by Benare and Samant admittance of giving false evidence (from a book) against Benare and others inciting him to continue or speak even though it was false-bring out the malicious intentions of the group against her. It is ironical that when Benare is asked to say anything about the charge that has been made against her, she is given only ten seconds by Kashikar, the judge. Moreover, during the trial, Prof. Damle is summoned merely as a witness while Benare remains the prime accused. The court's decision to destroy the child in her womb comes as a final blow to her who "collapses with her head on the table, motionless. Stifled sobs come from her" (108). And there is complete silence!

Her prolonged deliberated silence thereafter shows her helplessness. At first she strongly resists. But despite her strong stature, she feels suppressed. She passes through extreme mental agony. Therefore, towards the end, although the members try to falsely convince her that her prosecution was just a game, she feels helpless, desolate and alone. Benare, emotionally broken, agonised, looks 'half dead'. The end of the play records nursery rhymes in her mouth and contains a parallel to Benare's story. Like the sparrow in the rhyme, she only searched after her peaceful nest, 'a room of one's own'.

Thus, the play highlights the issue of women's vulnerability in our society. It is true that she does not want to bind herself in the established conventions. Perhaps due to her free mindset and independent views, she suffers deep humiliation by her co-workers and becomes an object of criticism. The school management decides to dismiss her from her job. The accusation of infanticide brought along her at the beginning of the trial turns into a verdict at the end. The court silences her protest. Benare becomes the victim of sadism, justice becomes impossible, as the judicial system is converted into an instrument of oppression of women. Tendulkar has, thus, voiced women's concern and has directed his criticism against the hypocritical male attitude in Indian society where a woman is suppressed and any small attempt for her freedom is badly crushed. Her story reveals how women have to face social wrath and criticism.

The keyword 'Silence' is prevalent all through the play. The command to remain 'silent' is pervasive throughout, starting with the title. The judge constantly cautions Benare to be silent when she interrupts. During the court proceedings, her voice, objections and protestations are curbed by the judge's thumping the table with gable. He uses the same power to silence his wife when she begins to voice her opinions. 'Silence' refers to other characters who, by deliberately remaining silent during the course of mock trial, become a part of the game plan. The word 'Silence' has deeper connotations as it is used to make one particular character silent- the vulnerable one- whose voice is crushed by her fellow workers. The ending of the play depicts Benare lying

lifeless on the floor in silence. The writer uses satire and irony to highlight the hollowness of middle-class moralities. Benare violates the social order, tradition and morality and is punished. But the question raised is who should punish whom and why? Benare's soliloquy towards the end raises some pertinent issues in our society: How to define 'freedom'. How much freedom should a woman get? Is marriage necessary for a woman to earn a respectable place in society. If an unmarried motherhood a terrible crime, should only a woman be made responsible for it.

One thing noteworthy is that although harassed and degraded, Benare has been depicted as strong and just. In this context, L. Rahman comments, "... she begins to sob with the idea in mind that though the field be lost, all is not lost; she has a mind which remains and will remain unconquered by the oppressive patriarchal ideology." (Rahman, 70) She earns the readers' sympathy and love despite being a victim of circumstances. She represents thousands of women who face discrimination inside and outside their homes, whose voice society tries to crush, but her silence itself speaks and conveys what even words cannot. Her 'Silence' in fact is clearly/ loudly audible to everyone as it shows her resistance and exposes the narrow mentality, hypocrisy and the dual standards of society which hardly accepts a woman who wants to stand on her own.

Works Cited

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