
**Analysis of The various social evils portrayed in Vijay Tendulkar's play
"Silence! The Court Is In Session"**

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Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is In Session* explores the deep-rooted societal evil of gender-based discrimination. The gravitas of Tendulkar's plays comes from the fact that he draws inspiration from events around him. The stimulus of this play came from an amateur theatre troupe on its way to stage a mock trial in a suburb named Vile Parle; the bits of conversation he heard as he guided the members to their destination suggested the outline of the play. This approach not only made the storyline contemporary but also made the story relatable to the person reading it. This paper is an analysis of the social evils this play portrays, and how the characters have constructed double standards to defend their actions, and condemn others. The play features characters that firmly believe in the supremacy of men over women. Their misogynistic attitude shines through each and every sentence they utter.

Keywords Vijay Tendulkar, *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, gender-based discrimination, prejudices, court-room, hypocrisy.

Introduction:

About the Playwright and the Play

Vijay Tendulkar is a renowned Indian playwright, and although his strong suit is Marathi, the translation of his plays into other languages, such as Hindi, English, etc, has been well received by audiences in India and abroad. This play brought Vijay Tendulkar recognition on a national scale. He was regarded with Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, and Girish Karnad as a leading force in the national theatre movement. Tendulkar wrote about problems that are deeply rooted in Indian socio-cultural philosophy. Reading about these problems enlightens the audience about the need to extirpate these deep-rooted philosophies of our parochial society. Though society and its norms underwent a sea change since the play was written in 1963, many of the societal evils portrayed in the play still exist in one form or another, even today.

The play "*Silence! The Court Is In Session*" explores equally flawed characters who do not hesitate to flay others for their mistakes. Through the treatment of his male characters

in the play, Tendulkar projects a vision of the world as a hostile place populated, for the most part, by hypocrites, egoists, puritans, and hard-hearted realists. The critique of the male characters in the play highlights that these characters arouse a unique interest in his drama and provide a better understanding of various aspects of his works. Through his female characters in the play, Tendulkar shows the changing scenarios of workplaces in India where women had just begun to step foot in the workplace and the various impediments on their path towards independence and self-sufficiency. It showed the polarising point of view of the world, as seen by Mrs. Kashikar, the perfect housewife, and the independent, carefree Miss Benare.

About the Characters

The play revolves around a group of people who travel to a suburb to perform a play at the community center. The reader expects that there will be banter and laughs among them as there is between friends, but finds out that apart from friendly banter, there will also be some pettiness and many unresolved issues. For them, performing plays was an escape from the disappointments in their personal lives. Miss Leela Benare initially seems like the tattletale of the group, as she deems it fit to tell Samant, a man she met a few minutes ago, everything about the personal failures, disappointments, and regrets of the other members of the group. She tells him how Mr. Kashikar always needs to have a prime objective behind his every action, that Mrs. Kashikar was a "poor woman" as she was an excellent housewife, "a real Mrs. Hand-That-Rocks-The-Cradle type" but she and Mr. Kashikar did not have any children. So, they took in a young boy named Balu Rokde, who is taunted for his total dependence on the Kashikars and inability to stand on his own feet; she even calls Balu Rokde the Kashikars' "slave." She tells Samant about Sukhatme, whom she describes as an expert on law but one to whom no client goes, and Sukhatme spends his time "squatting flies with legal precedents!" and about Ponkshe, the "scientist" who failed to pass his intermediate exams. Since Miss Benare indulges herself in this pettiness and doesn't leave any opportunity to mock or make fun of the failures or shortcomings of the other members of the troupe, the rest of them team up and try to mock Benare for her choices in life like her staying unmarried at such an advanced age and for her being over-friendly with men around her. So, the entire group consists of egoists who think it is their prerogative to mock and jeer at others for their flaws and failures but are shocked and taken aback when the same is done to them. After the rest are tired and irritated by Miss Benare's attitude towards them, and her trying to be smarter than others and being frivolous at all times, they take it upon themselves to adjudicate and punish Miss Benare for her "crimes."

The Societal Evils Portrayed

The play's characters struggle with their demons but still deem themselves fit and worthy to denigrate others for their so-called "sins." The Kashikars, for example, are far from perfect. They act like they are the epitome of perfection – the couple who was not lucky enough to be blessed with a child of their own took in a young child (Balu Rokde) and gave him the best life possible – fed him, clothed him, took care of him, educated him to give him a life full of opportunities and now spend their time spreading awareness and joy in the lives of the poor and the needy. This is what they pretend to be in front of the entire world. But after we spend a little time with the Kashikars in the locked hall, we see them for who they are – to an outsider; it would seem that the Kashikars are noble people who do many things

to help the needy and the downtrodden and that they changed young Balu's life for the better but during the play we see that they treat Balu not like their son but like a "slave" (word used by Miss Benare to define their relationship). Even from their exchanges, the relationship between the Kashikars and Balu Rokde does not seem cordial. Instead, it seems like one between a master and his helper. They constantly make Balu feel like a good-for-nothing fool by pointing out even his slightest mistakes. And Balu doesn't try to cross the Kashikars because he feels indebted to them. So, no matter how much they scold or mock him, he does not retaliate. Miss Benare told Ponkshe during their meeting that Mr. Kashikar is so hostile towards Rokde because he suspects that something is going on between Rokde and his wife. All was not well in the Kashikars' marriage, and Mr. Kashikar got irritated and angered by anything and everything that Mrs. Kashikar did or even tried to do. Sometimes, it seemed he didn't want her to talk in front of others but sat still in the corner. It is hard to imagine that Mrs. Kashikar liked this treatment, especially considering that she tried her best to be the perfect wife to Mr. Kashikar. Similarly, Sukhatme is a floundering lawyer in real life. Still, for the play, he turns into a person with such an extensive knowledge of the law that he plays the part of both - the prosecutor and the defense attorney- thereby dooming the trial to be unfair and unjust. Ponkshe, playing the role of the scientist in the witness box, there to provide scientific expertise on the mock case, had in real life taken his Inter-Science for the second time after failing the first time and worked as a clerk in the Central Telegraph Office. The experimental theatre actor Karnik was an unsuccessful actor who acted only in Intimate Theatre, another word for plays for a small audience - cleverly put so by Sukhatme. However, he still liked talking himself up as a very strong theatre presence and how lucky the others were that he was in the play. Miss Benare herself was in a tough situation, but instead of dealing with her problems, she deflected by poking fun at others. And so, this group of people failing at their own lives set out to perform a mock trial about a case against President Johnson for producing weapons to show the villagers how a court worked.

In the play, we see just how **misogynistic** the male characters are. Sukhatme said "*na stri swatantryamarhat*" i.e. "Woman is not fit for independence". Sukhatme even goes so far as to say that the accused, Miss Benare, doesn't deserve the mercy of the court and must be given the greatest and severest punishment for her terrible crime of unmarried motherhood because, in his eyes, the charge against Miss Benare of infanticide was not as grave as her real crime or "sin" of unmarried motherhood because he considers that motherhood without marriage is a very great sin according to their religion and their traditions. He agreed that infanticide is a dreadful act but if the accused Miss Benare is allowed to raise the offspring of her unlawful maternity, the very existence of society would be in danger. So, in his opinion, unmarried motherhood is much worse than infanticide because his parochial views led him to believe that if unmarried motherhood is encouraged, the institution of marriage will crumble and fall and his dream of a society governed by traditions and values would never come true. He said, "The accused has plotted to dynamite the very roots of our tradition, our pride in ourselves, our culture and our religion," as if the very survival of his religion was contingent on a poor woman's mistake of believing that the man she was deeply in love with loved her back. In his arguments, Sukhatme said, "A woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society; a woman is not fit

for independence." So, if, according to Sukhatme, a woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society, is she above making a mistake or being vulnerable. His religion put a woman so high up on a moral pedestal that even her slightest mistake is a crime and a sin in his eyes. The other party in this sin, Professor Damle, enjoys impunity because he is a man. Does he not bear the same grave responsibility of building up society's high values? Professor Damle is equally, if not more, guilty of the crimes Miss Benare is charged with. Was he not equally responsible for Miss Benare's unmarried motherhood because he used her for her body and refused to take any responsibility for the result of their illicit affair, or was he not guilty of infanticide since his rejection to marry Miss Benare would have forced her to take this drastic step? But Sukhatme and his religion fail to comprehend this because, according to his religion, "A woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society." So, the woman must be at fault because the man can do no evil. Even Mr. Kashikar seems slightly misogynistic in his treatment of his wife as if every single word uttered by Mrs. Kashikar was a cause of great distress for him. Mrs. Kashikar did not receive a fancy formal education but still tried her best to fit in her husband's world, so she often seemed desperate to be part of the conversation, Mr. Kashikar hated this and often chastised her like when he said to her, "What do you mean, 'Exactly'? Hold your tongue. Can't say a word!..." and when she offered to be the accused he scolded her "She can't get among a few people without wanting to show off ! Shows off all the time!" He never stopped to look at things from her perspective - about how she tries so hard to be a good wife and to fit into his world because she feels inferior. After all, she did not receive a good education, and even though she was an excellent housewife, she could not provide her husband with offspring, an heir to carry on the family legacy, as that was a very important custom during that time. It is well-known that during that period in India, marrying again because the first wife was barren was not considered a serious crime. The first wife would even encourage her husband to marry again because they loathed themselves for not being able to provide their husband with an heir. Even Mrs. Kashikar said Miss Benare was still unmarried because "What else? That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care less about responsibility! Let me _ _ _ _ _ It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread throughout our society."

The **double standards** that the characters in the play possess are mind-boggling. They have set certain standards in their minds, and anyone who does not conform to those standards is a deviant in their eyes. The group calls Balu a slave and says that he was "toiling away" for the Kashikars, but he was just a person trying as hard as he could to be grateful and to repay the Kashikars for their generosity even though they did not treat him like a son. They mocked Ponshe for being an inter-failed scientist, but he was a tenacious person determined to achieve his goal. He had taken his Inter-Science again and was also working as a clerk in the Central Telegraph Office for sustenance. The others viewed Sukhatme as an awful lawyer. Still, his performance displayed that he possessed immense knowledge, his disasters in the courtroom could be chalked up to jitters, and that he would get better with time and practice. The others viewed Miss Benare as a woman with low moral standards; Mrs. Kashikar said, "Just look at the way she behaves, _ _ _ _ _ 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!" Balu told her she made overtures to him some days before, after a performance. Balu, when summoned to the witness box, realized that no one would believe what Miss Benare would say and described a concocted story of how she held his hand, threatened him not to tell anyone about it, and slapped her because she was out of line. The worst part is that everyone believed his lies and the trial was so unfair that no one bothered to solicit the views of the other person involved in this exchange, Miss Benare. The group was the judge, the jury, and the prosecutor in Miss Benare's trial.

The biggest instance of the characters' Puritanism is the crimes of infanticide and unmarried motherhood for which Miss Benare was being prosecuted and was about to be punished by losing the infant in her womb and her job, her only source of income; there was no mention of the intellectual, Professor Damle. Was he not guilty that even though he was a family man, he made Miss Damle fall for him and had an affair with her, but when this affair resulted in Miss Benare's pregnancy, he abandoned her? He used her for her body, did not care for her, and left her all alone when she asked him to marry her. Was he not responsible for her unmarried motherhood because he was the one who refused to marry her and left her? The group did not accord any blame on Professor Damle and blamed only Miss Benare for the state she was in. During the entire proceedings of the "court," no blame or responsibility was accorded to the father of the unborn child of Miss Benare, suggesting that the group did not think there was any mistake on Professor Damle's part, nor was his moral character ever questioned.

The crime of infanticide alleged against the accused, Miss Benare, seemed frivolous considering what she said about her child to Ponshe – "She wants to bring up the child. It's only for the child she wants to go on living and get married." "The woman is not the crucial factor. **It's the baby that comes first.**" In her monologue at the end of the play - "And now it carries within it the witness of that time – 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. He must have a mother . . . a father to call his own – a house – to be looked after – he must have a good name!" This shows that she wanted nothing but the best for her child. We also see how deeply she loved Professor Damle when, even after he abandoned her and their unborn child and Ponshe calls the person responsible for the poor girl's condition a scoundrel, she comes to his defense – "Please don't call him a scoundrel. He may be a good man. He may be very great and wise. She may have fallen short. She may not have been able to convince him how deeply she feels for him . . . She worshipped that man's intellect. But all he understood was her body." Even after Professor Damle's betrayal, instead of seeing him for the spineless coward he was, she blamed herself for not finding a place in his life.

Subsequently, Miss Benare was not left with any choice as her unrequited love for Professor remained unreciprocated. When she turned to Ponshe with the hope that maybe

he would be noble enough to look past her mistakes and accept her and her child and give the child his name, here too, she received disappointment. Her other choice was to raise her child on her own. Still, she knew that the world was full of cold-hearted realists, who wouldn't try to understand her situation or sympathize, but they would point fingers at her moral character, and she would be forced to raise her child in isolation, somewhere nobody knew her. Her child would have to bear the shame of being born to an unmarried mother his/her entire life, so I don't think Miss Benare kept the bottle of Tik-20 (a powerful bedbug poison Ponshe saw in Miss Benare's bag during their meeting) in her purse to commit infanticide. It is evident from the excerpts of the play mentioned above that she loved her child too much to be able to kill her unborn baby. I think that the bottle of poison was her way of ending their suffering – both hers and her child's. In a society that would not have accepted her or her child, if Miss Benare had a moment of weakness and thought of ending her misery, can she be blamed? As an unmarried mother, life would have been hell for her and her child, so if she, for a moment, thought of taking the easy way out of her ordeal, it would not be fair to blame only her because the harsh and hostile people of society (for example - Professor Damle, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, etc.) drove her to have thought, even if for a moment about taking that extreme step.

Conclusion

To call "Silence! The Court Is In Session" a courtroom drama would be ironical considering that it is not set in the backdrop of a courtroom and the mock trial that took place was severely flawed - as the group was the judge, the jury and the prosecutor for the accused Miss Benare. The justice imparted in the play defies the general concept of justice we are familiar with because, in today's world, a person is at liberty to do whatever their heart desires, and if the play was set in the modern world, Miss Benare would have had complete authority over her life and the decisions she made and to lead her life as she deems fit, even if it meant that she wanted to live a quiet, peaceful life raising her son even on her own. Although the mindset of people has not changed so much that society would have welcomed her with open arms, surely there would be people who would frown upon her as an unmarried mother, but it would certainly not have been like the play, where the characters adjudicated that the befitting punishment for Miss Benare would be for her to lose her child and her only source of income, her job.

Surely, we as a society have come a long way from where we were when Tendulkar wrote this play. Many of the social evils described in the play have been extirpated, and many are hanging on by a thin thread. We may have come a long way, but there is still a long way to go to be our best selves.

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