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FEMINIST READING OF VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION*

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The term 'feminism' signifies a movement that creates political, social and economic equality for women and their struggle in contrast to repressive supremacy of patriarchy. Charles Fourier, French philosopher coined the term 'feminisme'. The term was first introduced in France and Netherlands in the year 1872. Then slowly it spread to Britain in 1890 and the United States in 1910. Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! the Court is in Session* is an assessment of patriarchal standards which reveals how the juristic rule serves as a device to silence the voice of women.

Vijay Tendulkar is undeniably an outstanding Indian playwright and is known for his inclusive artistic talent. Most of his work focuses on Indian, predominantly societal crisis which are strongly inbuilt in the Indian socio-cultural ideology. *Silence! the Court is in Session* is about the illicit relationship between Miss. Benare and Prof. Damle. In Tendulkar's plays, women characters are given importance. It is around the women characters that most of the action revolves. N.S. Dharan states in his book *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar* "We can see in these plays that Tendulkar, though not a self-acknowledged feminist, treats his women characters with understanding and compassion, while pitting them against men who are selfish, hypocritical and brutally ambitious" (28). In *Silence! the Court is in Session*, Vijay Tendulkar reveals in clear terms how shrewdly the male characters target Benare by exposing her private life.

In the play, the Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association which is an amateur theatre group arranges a mock play for village people about American President Johnson who is a threat to public because he is responsible for producing nuclear weapons. Miss Leela Benare is a teacher and also one of the members of the theatre group. There are other members of the group who take part in the play. They are Sukhatme, Mr and Mrs. Kashikar, Karnik, Ponshe, Balu Rokde, Professor Damle and Rawte. The members decide to act a new mock play other than the one to be enacted before the village people in order to while away the time. It is also done to make the new member Samant, the replacement of the absent witness in the play to understand the complex procedures of the court that are to be presented in the play. The male actors intentionally choose Benare as the accused for the trial play. In the mock play, Benare is suspected of infanticide. They plan to put her under the Section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code. She is suspected for trapping all the male members into marriage and also for having an illicit relationship with Professor Damle. All the members target Benare for spoiling the moral values in the society but not even a single soul realises that the mistake equally lies with Professor Damle who is responsible for her despicable situation. This scenario is well explained by Samita Paul in her book *Theatre of Power*.

The women characters in Tendulkar's theatre undergo a series of sufferings and tortures as the victims of hegemonic power-structure. In the male-dominated theatre-world they are constantly being 'other-ed'. In *Silence!* the focal point of interest lies in the struggle between women like Benare and her antagonists headed by the orthodox Kashikar and his associates. (34)

Miss Benare is portrayed as a school teacher who is rebellious and assertive in the beginning. She is conscientious in her profession. She bursts out to Samant about the enquiry that the management is holding against her which reveals that she is targeted. "I've worn myself to a shadow in this job! My life is my own-I

haven't sold it to anyone for job! My will is my own. My wishes are my own" (SC 58). This voice of independence makes her a new woman who has raised against the bullying arguments of patriarchy.

The mock play starts ardently but it doesn't last longer as each member attack Benare below the belt as they forget to respect her privacy. The members try their best to prove her moral negligence. They all join together and corner Benare and choke her voice of outcry. Benare resists their attack by making fun of each character's personal failures in order to degrade their authority. In this situation, Kasikar's comment is outrageous, he says, "What I say is, our society should revive the old custom of child marriage. Marry off the girls before puberty. All this promiscuity will come to a full stop" (SC 94). All the male members try to target Benare and she is forcibly subjugated by interrogating with false witnesses. Benare is terminated from her job but Professor Damley escapes from the punishment as he is a man. They praise motherhood with pompous phrases but the judge ordered her to abort the fetus. Sukhatme lays the last nail in the casket of womankind by saying, "No allowances must be made because the accused is a woman. Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. Woman is not fit for independence" (SC 98).

The most disturbing one is that even a woman is not supportive to another woman. Mrs.Kashikartoo joins with other men and criticises her for breaking her moral codes. "This is what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care less about responsibility! It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong" (SC 99).

Before passing final verdict on her, Benare is allowed to speak for ten seconds to defend herself. She who is motionless, clears up her mind and stands erect and expresses how her wishes were deprived:

... My life was a burden to me. (heaving a great sigh) But when you can't lose it, you realize the value of it. ...There's a great joy in a suicide that's failed. It's greater even than the pain of living. ...I swallowed that poison, but didn't even let a drop of it touch them! ...I cried inside, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair, and I taught them hope. (SC 116)

Benare in her monologue, attacks all men by calling them hypocrites whose only desire is her body not her bleeding heart. She comments, "These are the moral remains of some cultured men of 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" (SC 117). In the final verdict Benare is paralleled with criminals and sinners and the court orders her to abort her fetus. Squirming in pain, she tries to hold on but sobs continuously. L. Rahman states, "She begins to sob with the idea in mind which remains and will remain unconquered by the oppressive patriarchal ideology" (70).

Vijay Tendulkar makes use of certain dramatic symbols in the play. The door bolt that hurts Benare's finger at the very outset, physically locks her into the hall where her tormentors prosecute her. This incident itself is an externalization that reveals that there is no escape in her real life too. Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! the Court is in Session* is an assessment of patriarchal standards which reveals how the juristic rule serves as a device to silence the voice of women. She is sensitively harassed but still strives to search for her survival. She has immense tolerance to endure her suffering. Though Miss Benare dreadfully fights her lonely battle and outcries that her life and choices are her own, her voice is silenced by repressive patriarchal members.

Abbreviations

SC - *Silence! the Court is in Session*

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