Treatment of Women in Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence!* 
*The Court is in Session* and *Kamala: A Mirror to Indian Society*

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**ABSTRACT**

Vijay Tendulkar is like a shining star in the field of Marathi theatre who eventually transformed the regional theatre into the national. In his plays, the acute observation of life can be clearly seen. His plays can be seen as mirror to society because they portray the real picture of the orthodox Indian society. A Tendulkar play depicts two major tendencies prevalent in Indian society: male dominance and feminine frailty. Females are projected as sufferers and the one who are responsible for their suffering are males and many a times females themselves. In the plays *Silence!* *The court is in session* and *Kamala* Tendulkar, through the characters of LeelaBenare, Kamala, Sarita and Mrs. Kashikar too, has tried to show how the women in a male-dominated society are treated as an object, a plaything by men. These two plays limit the actual condition of women and act as mirror to society in describing their pitiful state. Both Sarita and Leela symbolize the exploitation of women-Sarita, within the four walls of the house and Leela, outside the house in the society.

**INTRODUCTION**

Women, since the centuries innumerable, are treated as objects by men. They are given secondary status in the society and made to believe that they are inferior to men in every aspect. Society has formulated different rules for them (men and women) just because they differ in gender. A man can walk away unscathed after committing a morally despicable crime but a woman is shunned by the society for the very same crime. Women, from the centuries, are taught to bear the exploitation meted out to them in the name of duty. They are so tightly bounded in the chains of our traditions and culture that they cannot even think of rebellion. And when some spark of rebellion is ignited then it is the women who turn against these rebellious women first.

*Silence! The court is in session* is the first play by Vijay Tendulkar. From the first play itself Tendulkar has tried to expose hollowness of our so called morality and “dual standards of society” (14 Wadikar). The central character of the play, LeelaBenare, is presented as a rebel who tries to go against “the established values of the basically orthodox society” (14, Wadikar). The play is all about LeelaBenare and how she for her “morally heinous” act gets punished by the so-called guardians of the society white her partner-in-crime (a man) is not even mentioned.

Leela Beware is a school schoolmarm who is thirty two or thirty-four years old. She takes delight in her job and performs her duty very sincerely. Her pupils adore her too. Beware is an enlightened artist also as she is a member of a theatre group. The other members include Sukhatme, Karmik,Ponkshe, Rokde, Prof. Damle, Ramte and lastly Kashikars. Except Benare, all the members of the group represent the fundamentally orthodox Indian society. The theatre group, in the words of Arundhati Banerjee is “a miniscule cross-section of middle class society, the members representative of its different sub-strata. Their characters, dialogues, gestures, and even mannerism reflect their petty, circumscribed existences” (Viii). These co-actors, frustrated in their individual lives, cunningly arrange a brutal game in the name of mock trial against LeelaBenare. They all deliberately gang upon her in the name of an issue of social importance i.e. infanticide. A charge of infanticide is laid upon Miss Benare and through the mock trial her character is malign and butchered in the public. Every member of the theatre group flings mud upon her character and includes the innocent villager Samant too in their act. They in the words of G.P. Deshpande represent the dogs who hunt a hen:

The play *Silence! The court is in session* is highly symbolized in nature. During the court proceedings of the mock-trial, such animals as dogs, as hen etc, enter the hall. These animals symbolize an imbroglio of innocent,
simple and straightforward woman like Miss Beware (i.e. the hen) by cruel person with dual personality (i.e. the dogs). So, the pursuit of the hen by the dogs symbolically represents Miss. Benare in humanhunt by her fellow companions (23).

The first witness against Ms. Benare is Mr. Gopal Ponkshe. Ponkshe has taken Inter-Science for two times and “works as a clerk in the central Telegraphy office” (8). He is obviously, a middle class man with middle-level talent. When prosecutor Mr. Sukhatme asks Mr. Ponkshe about the marital status of the accused i.e. Ms. Benare then he replies, “To the public eye, she is unmarried”, hinting of her “rumoured” affair with professor Damle. He further sully her character by saying that Ms. Benare runs after men too much. Mr. Ponkshe, who himself is not a man of his words because he breaks his promise to Benare, points Beware as a desperate and characterless women who begs other people to share the burden of her unmarried pregnancy:

She asked jokingly: “Well, are you fixed upon somewhere?” So I said,“Unless I find someone just to my taste. I’m not interested in marrying… So I asked whether she had some promising bride in mind. She said, ‘yes, I feel she’s the kind you want. You just have to understand her unusualness’…She replied, “The girls just gone through a shattering heart break, and” “the fruit of that love”-here she stumbled a bit-“is in her womb. Actually it is no fault of hers. She wants to bring up the child. Infact its only for the child she wants to go on living and get married.’ And I said “This doesn’t become you, Miss Benare. It’s an insult to have asked me this at all. Do you think I’m so worthless” (62-64).

Ms. Benare’s co-actors get a sick pleasure while watching her struggle with awkward situation during the mock trial. They one after other heap charges against her and don’t leave even one chance to humiliate her. BaluRokde, her co-actor, who is also a lot younger than her, to hold up his false pride turn situation totally against Miss Benare and present himself as a righteous person. In reality, after her failed attempt with Ponkshe to secure her child a stable environment she turns to Rokde for the same purpose. But Rokde, who is being tempted at one side because Beware promises to provide him a secure future, cannot extricate himself from Kashikars who have sponsored his studies and also at the same time he fears the society. Irritated by his spinelessness and hypocrisy Benare slaps him. But Rokde presents the situation in a way which tells different story i.e. in which only Benareis desperate and Rokde is morally good person who slaps Benare for her cheap acts. Rokde is a kind of person who turns black into white, a hypocrite who does not mind marrying to get a secure future if not society comes into his way, but in public concocts a false story to uphold his false image and thus maligning the character of a woman.

Not only Rokde but all of her co-actors plot against her and make Samant, an innocent villager, a scope goat to carry out their heinous plot against her. Her co-actors have got an inking of her affair with Prof. Damle but they are not fully aware about detail. So, they make Samant recite a make-believe story which some extent bears resemblance to the original story. These people in some twisted sense get entertained by making the embarrassing and sorrowful moments of a woman’s life public. During this whole episode equally or we can say the person of the accused i.e. Ms. Benare had relationship with Prof. Damle because she loved, no in her words “worshipped” him and “offered my body on the altar of my worship” (75). But her “intellectual god” (76) took all she offered and in return, gave nothing. He brushes her aside when he comes to know that she is pregnant,“where you should go is entirely your problem. I feel great sympathy for you. But I can do nothing. I must protect my reputation”(45). Shattered, Benare threatens to take her life and in response comes a chilly reply,“Then do that. I also have no choice. If you kill yourself, I shall be in a torment….But this threat will not make me budge an inch from my considered course of action.” (45) Both are equally responsible for their illicit affair only Benare (a woman) is criticized and Prof. Damle (a man) is left scot-free. In fact Mr. Damle has broken more social and moral rules than Benare because he not only cheated his wife and children but also left Benare to fend for herself after she makes her pregnancy known shirking way from his responsibility. In the words of L.S. Deshpande,

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…of the play: “The show must go on!”, exposing the moral and intellectual snobbery of the white collar, educated middle class Indians. (p 330)

Women also play an active role in the exploitation of other women in the society. In other words we can say that woman herself is also responsible for the tortures laid upon her, she herself is the bane of her existence. Mrs. Kashikar, even
after being a woman, feels delight when Ms. Benare’s character is maligned. She being a woman herself makes ugly comments about other woman’s character and why that woman is not married:

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!... That’s how promiscuity has spread throughout our society...what better proof? Just look at the way she behaves. I don’t like to say anything since she one of us. 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! (54-55).

It is one thing to talk negatively about the freedom given to women by men because we live in a male dominant society but it is quite ironical, when women, themselves question the freedom given to them and speak for cutting short this freedom provided to them. Mrs. Kashikar is one of such women who is believer of dictums such as :’”a woman deserves no freedom”(Manusamriti).

MsBenare’s co-stars not only torment and sully her character on the account of her affair but also because of her past. Her innocent but grave mistake in the past when she was barely fourteen years old, is ‘glorified’ in public by Karnik. Ms. Benare, in the prime of her folding youth, fell in love with her maternal uncle. Because in her strict house, “he was the one who came close to” (74) Ms. Benare.. It was her maternal uncle who praised her bloom, who gave her love. She didn’t know it was sin to have this kind of relationship i.e. incestuous relationship. She only fell in love with the person who, in her opinion, gave love to her. But her mirage of love shatters soon when her loving and brave man turns his tail and runs away. Disappointed in love a tender age Benare tries to commit suicide but somehow is saved. And it is her suicide attempt after her first heart break that too involving forbidden relationship which is made public by Karnick during the mock trial.

Troubled by all sorts of humiliating comments flung upon her and watching her private life made public in a disgusting manner, Benare tries to leave the hall but is unsuccessful. The door doesn’t open even after she struggles hard with it. In view of Arundhati Banerjee, incident of the faulty door bolt is an external event of the no escape flight in which Benare finds herself in real life.

Following the incident she is showered by crude remarks by the so-called social workers of the society. They describe her as “a sinful canker on the body of society” (67). She is not given any chance to say anything in her defense, even when our judicial system gives the right to defend to most serious criminals also. The criminal she has committed are not legally even crimes they are just social taboos of our orthodox society. But she is treated worse than a criminal in the court while her male companion (Professor Damle) in crime is summoned just as a witness.

LeelaBenare is held guilty in the court for the sin of unmarried pregnancy. She is also dismissed from her job because according to so-called authorities she is not fit to teach : “It is a sin to be pregnant before marriage. It would be still more immoral to let such a women teach, in such a condition! There is no alternative- this woman must be dismissed.” (69).

The very job to which she has devoted entire life is snatched away from her. She put her whole life into her job, reduced herself to shadow in her job but at the end is dismissed. Benare suffered from betrayals in her love life- first from uncle and second from Prof. Damle. Her male companions loved her for her body only. And when their purpose was fulfilled they deserted her. Betrayed by men in her life, whom she worshipped as god, filled her with despair. But she did not let her despair reach her pupils she taught them hope.

I did not teach any of this to those tender, young souls. I swallowed that poison, but didn’t even let a drop of it touch them. I taught them beauty. I taught them purity. I cried in side, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair and taught them hope. For what sin they are robbing me of my job, my only comfort(30).

Yet, the greatest blow to her is not her dismissal from job but the mock trial’s judgement. And the judgement is to destroy the child in her womb. Her fellow companions give lectures such as“Mother and The Motherland both are even higher than heaven”, “Women is a wife for a moment, but a mother for ever” (30, 31) on motherhood but at the same time they don’t hesitate to tarnish the image of same motherhood just because that motherhood is unmarried motherhood:

Motherhood without marriage has always been considered a very great sin by our religion and our traditions. Moreover if the accused’s intension of bringing up the offspring of this unlawful maternity is carried to completion. There will be no such thing as moral values left...infanticide is a dreadful act. But bringing up the child of an illegal union is certainly more horrifying (71).

To ‘cleanse’ the society of the sin of unmarried pregnancy as well as hold the morals of society, the upholder of justice, i.e. court also commits a sin, sin of killing the life yet to be born. The so called guardians of our tradition and culture, here
LeelaBenare has a lot to say in her defense. She wants to pour out all the emotions and feelings pent up for so many years. But whether she is allowed to transform all these into words on not remains a mystery. In the words of Arundhati Benerjee:

LeelaBenare’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, thus, suggesting that in all probability what she has to say for herself is swallowed up by the silence imposed upon her by the authority. In fact, during the court providing on several occasions, her objective and protestation are drowned by the judge’s cry of silence and the banging of the gravel.

LeelaBenare’s long but unspoken soliloquy symbolize that women are not allowed to voice out their thoughts, feelings in our male dominated society. Our constitution gives the right to speech and expression to all its citizens. But women even after the independence of our country are not allowed these basic rights granted to all its citizens by our constitution. This simply shows that our society are simply treated as objects who are not allowed to have its own thoughts, feelings, opinion and independence: “Woman is not fit for independence… this is the laid down for us by tradition. Abiding this rule, I make a powerful plea. ‘Na Miss Benareswantryamerhati.’ Miss Benare is not fit for independence”(70). As objects they also have no room for any kind of mistake but their male counterparts can break social or moral taboo and remain unscathed from its consequences. Same happen with Miss Banare and Prof. Damle. Miss Benare because she broke the social taboo of unmarried pregnancy, shame and indignity are inflicted upon her by her fellow companions, “the woman who is an accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood… The character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality”(70). While Prof. Damle, despite disowning his responsibility is merely as a witness. Arundhati Benerjee points out, “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 wedlock.” (viii)

The play ends with Samant placing the green parrot, which he bought for his nephew at the beginning of the play, near Miss Benare who is sitting motionless on the floor after verdict of destroying her womb is passed. The toy parrot placed near lifeless Benare probably symbolize that she will have to behave according to the wishes of society from here on just like a parrot. The castigation of LeelaBenare under the garb of mock trial signifies the society’s ruthlessness in cornering an individual and sacrificing her at the altar of morals and conventions. But the irony here is that the hangmen themselves are equally guilty but they go scot-free under the protection of society which they pretend to represent. The play Kamala, written in 1982 is based on a real life incident :Sachin Tendulkar moulded the story of Kamala from the incident of AshwinSarin, the then correspondent editor of the Indians Express, fetching a girl from a rural fresh market and presenting her at the press conference. Tendulkar, in the play, throws light on the ghastly flesh market, the position of women in society. (24, Wadikar) and the hypocrisy of men in male-dominated society. The play is also a critique on Indian family system where women by their male counterparts are used as slaves, menial servants and stepping stones.

The play Kamala a Delhi based journalist, Jai Singh Jadhav, who has bought an adivasi/tribal girl, Kamala, from a flesh market in Bihar. He through Kamala wants to expose the bitter truth that flesh markets still exist in our country area being operated with the help of local police and well known politicians. But his real purpose is not to expose this in human practice for the welfare of its victims but to gain name, fame and promotion in his job through this exposure. He “never stops to think what will happen to Kamala after this expose” (XI Banerjee) as he has decided to send her to the women’s Home after her use.

Sarita, Jai Sing’s wife, is a well educated and well mannered woman who hails from an aristocratic family. She considers it the duty of a good wife to share the sorrows as well as joys of her husband. She is a doting wife whose life purpose is to take care of needs of her husband and serve him whole heartedly. So, Sarita keeps watchful note of all his phone calls, orders the servants to clean the house and prepare food according to his taste before he comes home:

Sahib is coming. Make a curry from that cauliflower in the fridge. See if those mangoes in the basket Kakasaheb brought are ripe. If they all, put out six or seven. See if there’s any beer. If there isn’t send Ramdev to get some. Is last night’s bryani still good…Did Ramdev get the clothes from the Dhobi? (4)

Sarita takes care of her husband in every way whether it be physically, socially or domestically. She never denies him. Thus she without knowing herself, behaves like a slave who dances at the tunes of his/her master. Other people are aware of her
status in Jai Singh’s life but she herself it not. She does not know that she is just a ‘lovely bonded’ slave to him as Jai, a friend of Jaising, perfectly points out:

Hi, Bhabhiji, I mean an English hi’ to him and a Marathi ‘hai’ to you. This warrior against exploitation in the country is exploiting you. He’s made a drudge out of horse-riding independent girl from a princely house. Hai, hai![Theatrically, to Jai Singh.] Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns make slaves of wife!... (To Sarita] By, lovely bonded labour (17)"

Jai Singh, at the one hand makes effort to expose the business of flash trading in our country (though for his personal gains) but on the other hand he behaves inhuman like those flesh traders by treating his wife as a slave not a fellow human being. Jai Sing has totally dominated Sarita as she is not allowed even to make a single decision in the house she has been serving for ten years. He warns her, “It’s I who take decisions in this house and no one else. Do you understand.”

But the situation changes when Kamala enters their house. Sarita gradually begins to realize that she, too, like Kamala is a kind of slave to him. Only difference is that her slavery is not objectionable in the eyes of law while slavery of Kamala is unlawful. She feels shocked and disgusted when Jai Singh proudly tells her that he bought Kamala from a market where women are publicly auctioned after being tested by men;

They sell human beings at this bazaar at Luhardaga beyond Ranchi... They have an open auction for woman of all sorts of ages. People come from long distances to make their bids. The men who want to bid handle the women to inspect them whether they are firm or flabby, young or old, healthy or diseased. How they full in the breast, in their waist, in their thighs and ...(14).

Sarita realizes how hypocrite Jai Singh is when he takes Kamala to Press conference in her tattered clothes, which barely coves her flash, and watch get humiliated when reporters ask her vulgar questions, “So while they were asking her those terrible questions, and making fun of her you just sat and watched, did you?” (30). Kamala unknowingly through her questions, makes Saritarealize her position in Jai Singh’s life. She makes Sarita realize that she is not different from her, she is also a slave- an educated slave.

Kamala : Can I ask you something? You won’t be angry?
Sarita : No, Go on
Kamala : How much did he buy you for?[Sarita is confused at first]
Sarita : What?
Kamala : I said how much did he buy you for?
Sarita[recovering]: Me, look here, Kamala (changes her mind and sits down beside her) For seven hundred.
Kamala: My God! Seven hundred?
Sarita: why was it too little?
Kamala : It was an expensive bargain, memshanib.
If you pay seven hundred, and there are no children.
Kamala : Memasahib, if you don’t understand, I’ll tell you, the master bought you, he bought me, too….So, memsahib, both of us must stay here together like sisters. Well keep the master happy...Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the matter; the other fifteen, I’ll sleep with him” (34, 35)

Kamal makes Sarita realize the bitter truth that she like Kamala is also a slave to him. Jai Singh brought Kamala for Rs 250 but for Sarita he received a dowry of Rs. 700 from her father. Kamala will bring him a name, fame and promotion in his job and Sarita provides him with sexual pleasure, social companionship and domestic comfort in conjugal life. Kamala makes Sarita understand that like good slaves they have to try their best to please their master i.e. Jai Singh, because he has spent a good deal open them.

Kamala’s stalks opens Sarita eyes and she realizes that she is nothing but a good and obedient slave to Jai Singh. The man whom she thought as her partner, her companion for lifetime is nothing but a master whom she has served for ten years:

I was asleep. I was unconscious even when I was awake. Kamala woke me up with a shock… I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of a slave. I have norights at all in this house. Slaves don’t have rights, do they Kakasaheb…Dance to their master’s whim. Laugh when says, Laugh. Cry, when she says cry, when he says pick up the phone, they must pick it up…., when he says, lie on the bed-she (she is twisted in pain) (46)
Once Sarita realizes that she is nothing but a slave to Jai Singh, she decides to change her condition and starts asserting her individuality. This she starts by objecting to Jai Singh’s verdict of sending Kamala to NariNiketan and denying to go to a party with him. She also refuses to bed with him but Jai Singh forcefully beds her. Sarita is so angry and frustrated with his bullying behavior that she thinks to arrange a press conference to expose the true colours of her husband. She thinks:

I am going to present a man who is in year 1982 still keeps a slave, right here in Delhi, Jai Singh Jadhaw. I’m going to say: this man’s a great advocate of freedom. And he brings home aslave and exploits her. He does not consider a slave a human being just a useful object. One you can use and throw away. He gets people call him a sworn enemy of tyranny. But he tyrannizes his own slave as much as he likes. (46)

Though Sarita shows her rebellious side to Jai Sing by defying him but at the end, when Jaisingh is sacked from his job, she puts a hold on her defiance. Though Jaisingh behaved inhumanly with her but she has not forsaken her humanity. So when Jai Singh returns home after being dismissed from his job she tries to comfort him. Even when Jai Singh, in extremely agitated state, shouts as her and also shoves her away she does not get angry. Because she can comprehend the reason behind his actions. But this does not mean that she has given up the idea of rebellion or she is letting the things return to their former way. She is determined to gain her freedom and identity but not for the time being. She says:

But at present I’m going to lock all that up in a corner of my mind and forget about it. But a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave. I’ll no longer be an object to be used and thrown away. I’ll do what I wish, and no one I’ll rule over me. That day has to come. And I’ll pay whatever price. I have to pay for it (52).

Arundhati Banerjee also points out that Vijay Tendulkar through his stage directions has manifested that” Sarita cannot unlearn what she has came to realize and there is a hope for her attaining independence sometime in the future” (581-82).

The play ends on a hopeful note that Sarita will win her independence in the near future.

In Kamala apart from Kamala and Sarita there is also a minor but significant character, Kamalabai. Kamalabai is maid servant to Jadhavs and is working in the family since the marriage of Sarita. She does all the household work still she is treated badly by Jai Singh. Kamala, like a normal human being, feels displeased at being ill-treated by her master and at times she even threatens to leave the house. But she is clearly unable to do so owing to her poor economic condition. The character of Kamalabai symbolizes the complete surrender of women due to their weak economic conditions. Her condition is similar to her namesake Kamala, brought from the flesh market and their purpose is also same i.e. to fulfill the needs of their master for which they were brought.

REFERENCES
