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SILENCING FEMALE SUBALTERN THROUGH SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN VIJAY
TENDULKAR'S *PLAY SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION*

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Abstract

Sexual harassment of female subaltern at different places is a recurring problem not only in India but around the globe. The causes of sexual harassment have multidimensional aspects. In Vijay Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Miss Leela Benare is a victim of male sexual politics. She is harassed sexually and mentally by the hegemonic power structure. The re-reading of the whole play from the perspective of silencing female subaltern through sexual harassment opens new vistas in the field of social studies. The game of "mock-trial" in the play is actually a game of silencing a woman who excels in proficiency, superior merit and potentialities. Tendulkar's purpose to introduce the "game" of mock-trial is to show how a woman is silenced by male sexual politics to preserve the male sexual dominance. The mock-trial court silences the voice of Miss Leela Benare by banging the gavel which symbolically represents the hegemony of patriarchal ideology. Miss Benare cannot speak before the authoritative sound of gavel, a silencing instrument. So, in this research article our endeavour is to show different aspects of sexual harassment of financially independent woman like Leela Benare and to find out some ways so that such harassments may be rooted out. As a subaltern, Miss Leela Benare sometimes cannot speak; sometimes, there is none to listen to her; and sometimes she is silenced by patriarchal agents. Therefore, the subaltern theory of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak is very much applicable in the whole process of mock-trial and silencing Leela Benare.

Keywords: silence, subaltern, sexual harassment, patriarchy, mock-trial.

Introduction.

Silence! Silence must be observed. Silence must be observed.... while the court is in session. Can't shut up at home, can't shut

up here. (*Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar 77)

Silencing the voice of women at home or outside has been the practice of patriarchal society irrespective of caste, colour, creed or community all over the

world. The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a study of power operating as a silencing force. The Court pronouncing "Silence!", itself is a mechanism to silence the natural human drives and truth under the code of the legal or legitimate. In the play, the Mock-Trial Court repeatedly silences the voice of Miss Leela Benare. The banging of gavel by the judge is here an instrument of silencing the subaltern as female. The gavel creates louder sound than the soft sound of a female to repress her voice and forces her to respect the hegemony of patriarchal ideology. Naturally, during the mock trial Miss Leela Benare, as a subaltern, sometimes cannot speak; sometimes, there is none to listen to her; and sometimes she is silenced by patriarchal agents. Therefore, the subaltern theory of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak is very much applicable in the whole process of mock trial and silencing the victim. The banging of gavel as silencing instrument is very much symbolic and reminds us of the beating of drum by Malindar to strangle the voice of his wife Chandidasi while branding her as a bayen in Mahasweta Devi's play *Bayen*. Thus, the beating of drum in dalit society or banging of gavel in civilized society are the symbolic patriarchal mechanisms through which the voices of subaltern as female are repressed or suppressed. Here the mock-trial court is nothing but the microcosm of society.

Vijay Tendulkar's magnum opus *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) skillfully depicts the plight of a young financially independent woman, Miss Benare who is bitterly subalternized by the co-actors of her own theatre troupe. Miss Benare is harassed sexually and mentally by the hegemonic power-structure. Harassment, and especially sexual harassment, are recognized as a form of discrimination on the ground of sex and it is contrary to the principle of equal treatment between men and women. Miss Benare is an example of those female subalterns who are victims of sexual harassment at different places. From this perspective, Tendulkar delineates a new form of subalternization of women in postcolonial patriarchal set up.

The issue of sexual harassment of financially independent women at different places is a recurring problem not only in India but around the

globe. The influx of large number of women workers at different sectors in the last twenty years and their harassment in myriad forms take this play to a different height. Though it was written fifty-five years ago, the situation has not gone through any positive change, but has further aggravated. Herein lies the relevance and significance of this play as a study of subalternization of women at the beginning of the third decade of 21st century.

Objectives of the Study.

- i. To find out the patriarchal psychology behind sexual harassment.
- ii. To show the nature of sexual harassment of financially independent female workers.
- iii. To bring out the genius of Vijay Tendulkar in highlighting the theme of sexual harassment fifty-five years ago.
- iv. To find out some recommendations so that the problems of sexual harassment may be minimized or rooted out.
- v. To encourage further research on sexual harassment.

Analysis and Findings.

Miss Leela Benare is an educated independent woman of thirty four years old working as an assistant teacher of a school. She possesses a spontaneous joie de vivre and is proud of her own performance as a successful teacher. Her popularity leads to the envy of her colleague and the management of school. Leela Benare is also a social activist and a member of the amateur theatre troupe called *The Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association*. In this troupe also most of her co-actors are jealous of her liberated life and her success in her profession as a teacher because they have failed or disappointed in their lives or professions. Tendulkar has skillfully exposed the failure pervading their lives – the childlessness of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, the inefficiency of Sukhatme as a Lawyer, the vain attempt of Karnie to be a successful actor, the non-fulfillment of Panksh's dream to be a scientist and last but not the least the inability of Rokde to attain an independent, adult existence. Naturally, they cannot tolerate Miss

Benare who is financially and academically very much successful and has got a reputation as a teacher. As her co-actors are professionally and financially inferior to Miss Benare, they derive pleasure by harassing her and try to gather power by humiliating her personal life which, according to them, violates the patriarchal social norms. In this way, they try to prove superior to or more powerful than Miss Benare. According to the power theory of Michel Foucault, the humiliation and sexual harassment of Miss Binera is justified on part of the other members of the theatre group. Sexual harassment is often a power play opposed to sexual desire. Thus, the psychological, physical along with sexual harassment of Miss Benare generate from her financial independence and professional competency which make her powerful and hurt the male-ego or patriarchal attitudes of her colleagues or co-actors. They, therefore, leave no stone unturned to cut Binera down to size.

The plot of the play is that of a play-within-a-play, a mock trial to make Samant, a village boy, aware of the activities of court and to pass time. Since Samant has never seen a court, they decide to perform a mock-trial for him. Thus, the group decides to play the "game" and accuse Miss Benare.

Kashikar: Prisoner Miss Benare, under section No.302 of the Indian Penal Code you are accused of the crime of infanticide. Are you guilty or not guilty of the aforementioned crime? (Tendulkar 74)

Now, in the guise of a "game", the actual game of silencing Benare begins. "After all it's a game. Just a game, that's all" (Tendulkar 75). She is a female subaltern but holds "power" in the eyes of patriarchal representatives like Kashikar, Shukatme, Ponshe, Karnik and Rokde. They subalternize Benare by harassing her sexually and psychologically. The mock trial is indicative of the killing of Benare's real "self" and its replacement by a socially acceptable and appropriate "self" imposed on her. Her co-actors dissect her personal life and lay it bare before all to assess on patriarchal moral ground. Somehow, they prove in the trial that Miss Binera has an illicit relationship with Prof. Damle and she is carrying an illegitimate child in her womb.

Benare is a victim of male sexual politics. "The mock-trial is a systematic and organized male schematization to turn Benare into an object of male choice. The occasional reference to her violation of norms is actually a male attempt to reduce her status. It may be called a fear of male castration." (Paul 38). The male members satisfy their sadistic hunger by exposing her sexual life and thereby committing the crime of sexual harassment.

The Journey of Sukhatme from mock-trial as a game to dig up Benare's personal life is actually to arouse Karnik's interest about Benare's sexual life and to disclose it before all other members. The implied plan of the whole mock-trial is to preserve the male sexual domination.

Male sexual domination is a material system with an ideology and metaphysics. The sexual colonization of women's bodies is a material reality; men control the sexual and reproductive uses of women's bodies. The institutions of control include law, marriage... organized religion, and systematized physical aggression against women. (Freedman 64)

Sexual harassment continues when the question is asked about whether Benare is married or unmarried or about her mortal conduct.

Sukhatme: Mr. Ponshe, is the accused married or unmarried?

Ponshe: Why don't you ask the accused?... To the public eye, she is unmarried.

Benare: *[interrupting]* And to the private eye? (Tendulkar 81)

This type of sexual harassment reaches its zenith when Miss Leela Benare is called Leela Damle hinting at her illicit relationship with Prof. Damle.

Sukhatme: *(Walking around in front of Benare a while, and suddenly pointing a finger)* Your name is Leela Damle. (Tendulkar 97)

Thus, the play is not just about violence but about the sexual violence or sexual harassment mated out by the patriarchal norms under the guise of

marriage, motherhood, womanhood and moral conduct.

In his pioneering book *History of Sexuality (1976)*; Vol-I, Michel Foucault discusses on his concept of power and its implication. One of his observations is "Power is exercised rather than possessed" (Foucault 10). For this reason, the socially and professionally failure male co-actors of Benare use every opportunity to exercise "power" over a "female" – who is a subaltern in their eyes. Tendulkar presents Benare as an embodiment of those intellectual women who excel in their proficiency with their superior merits and potentialities. The male co-workers, on the contrary, try to subalternize them and reduce them to the biological level of maternity. They force them to lead a family life as a mother or as a wife.

The root of the harassment of such women like Benare lies in the traditional gender role imposed by culture. At work places, men perceive women in their gender role over and above their work role. The result of the inappropriate expected role is sexual harassment. In the matter of Benare's case too, her sex role or gender role as a woman spillover the work role. This is popularly known as **Sex Roll Spillover Theory of Sexual Harassment**. Another theory which is called **Socio-cultural Theory** propounds that sexual harassment is manifestation of patriarchal system. The perpetrators of sexual harassment have no regard for women as an equal human being. It is fun to them. **Feminist Theory** regards it as a product of gender inequality and a normative form of masculinity to maintain the already existing gender stratification by emphasizing sex role expectations. Thus, gender inequality, sexuality and the resultant subalternization may easily be identified as systems of power and domination, with adult men wielding sexual power to assert and maintain dominance over women. Therefore, the causes of sexual harassment have multidimensional aspects. No single theoretical framework is enough to draw any conclusion in this respect.

Sexual harassment of financially independent women is an action that may be in the form of verbal, non-verbal, visual or physical. In a nut shell,

it is a sexually oriented conduct that may endanger the victim's performance and undermines the victim's personal dignity by creating a hostile work environment. The following speech of Sukhatme is really a verbal sexual harassment in the name of a mock-trial "game"

Sukhatme: ...Can you tell the court how you came to stay unmarried to such a mature such an advanced age?... How many chances of marriage have you had so far in your life? And how did you miss them. Tell the court. (Tendulkar 98)

Then, Mr. Kashikar and Sukhatme raise several unwanted and humiliating questions regarding Benare's age and her personal as well as sexual life. Even Mrs. Kashikar joins others in harassing Benare without any compassion. It is justly said women are the enemies of women. Women harass women because they, too, propagate patriarchal culture and try to gather some power by harassing other women. The theory of power play also works here. Being a woman, Mrs. Kashikar attacks Benare more bitterly in the matter of her sexual involvement and her financial independence.

Mrs. Kashikar: ...That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care less about responsibility! It is the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread throughout our society. (Tendulkar 99-100)

Here, Mrs. Kashikar's reference to "get everything without marriage" is indicative of Benare's sexual life and it is a worst kind of sexual harassment. Being disappointed and unsuccessful in life, Mrs. Kashikar blames the earnings of women for degradation of character of women. "The whole barbaric of society is being soiled" (Tendulkar 94) for this reason. It is a "sinful canker on the body of society" (Tendulkar 112).

Through the mock-trial, Tendulkar holds a mirror to patriarchal social response in the matter of moral code and conduct. Miss Benare is accused of having an illicit affair with Prof. Damle. The court

repeatedly silences the voice of Benare, but remains precariously silent about the main culprit Prof. Damle. The power that Prof. Damle weilds in his absence indicates the hidden power of the discourses that lie behind the cruelty of gender discrimination in society. In his absence, he weilds the authority of the Freudian father figure which Leela Benare rebels against. Actually, female as subaltern are forced to bear the whole responsibility of morally upright behaviour and men are by nature considered to be mischievous, willful and wild. Patriarchal norms render only men this privilege. Women, on the contrary, must be punished for breaking the norms; she must be killed brutally and bitterly in physical as well as psychological senses.

Miss Benare was sexually abused by two elderly men. The first one was her own maternal uncle. When she was “hardly fourteen”, she was abused by her “mother’s brother”. At that time she was an innocent child. In the prime of her unfolding youth, her maternal uncle praised her “bloom every day. He gave me love” (Tendulkar 117). Being an innocent child, she did not know that “It was a sin! I didn’t even know what sin was – I swear by my mother. I didn’t (*she sobs loudly like a little girl*). I insisted on marriage... And my brave man turned tail and ran. Such a rage – I felt such a rage against him”. (Tendulkar 117) The second person was Prof. Damle whom Benare loved in her mature age. But the lot of a subaltern remains the same. Her second love was not

love at all – it’s worship! But at the same time mistake. I offered my body on the alter of my worship. He wasn’t a god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body. That’s all! Again, the body! (*screaming*) This body is a traitor. (*She is writhing with pain*) I despise this body – and I love it! (Tendulkar 118)

Thus, she was betrayed as a female subaltern twice because her maternal uncle and Prof. Damle longed for her “body”, not her pure love or intellectual worshipping.

Therefore, “the sexual colonization of women’s bodies” (Freedman 64) perpetuates the subalternization of women. Like Benera, the body of

a female subaltern may be her enemy. Her body makes her either “Devil” or “Devi”. A woman can never live as an individual. Just to subalternize women, society does not accept women as normal human beings or individuals who have vices along with virtues. Women too consider their own selves as bodies and care for it for the pleasure of men. This is what patriarchy has done to women and poisoned their selves beyond repair. Leela Benare pays the price of being different because deviation and difference are things which Indian society does not give to its female as subaltern.

In the last speech or monologue, Benare superbly expresses her multiple subalternity by the cruel trap of patriarchy. She discloses how she was sexually abused by her maternal uncle and by Prof. Damle. Now, her co-actors are sexually harassing her because of her unhappy involvements. This is a dirty politics of patriarchy to keep women in a subaltern position. Thus the whole play is about the cruel game of “silence” to suppress women’s sexual desire and about the sexual harassment of financially independent women.

The harassment of Miss Leela Benare in the mock trial reminds us of the trial of three women in the National Award Winner Best Hindi Film *Pink* (2016) directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury. Like Benera, in this film three financially independent women (Meenal, Andrea and Falek) are brought to the trial and their characters are questioned based on their behaviour and appearance. They too became the victims in the hands of social standards for women determined by patriarchal ideology. A woman should not laugh while talking. The venue decides the character of women to men whether she is in temple, in party or in rock show. Her standing on the same spot at night or in day-light too decides her character. Her natural lively, happy behaviour is supposed to be a “hint” to men, with which he can touch her or harass her or assault her. In the film, the three women were sexually assaulted because Rajveer, the culprit, says that they gave “hints” to them by laughing and touching –

Hass hass ke bath karrahethi

Touch karke bath karrahethi

Acche ghar ki ladkiya parties me nehee jathi.

This kind of patriarchal standard of the behaviour of women is found in Tendulkar's play too.

Mrs. Kashikar: It is the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong.... Just look at the way she behaves.... Should there be no limit to how freely a woman can behave with a man?.... Look how loudly she laughs! How she sings, dances, crack jokes. And wondering alone with how many men day in and day out. (Tendulkar 100)

It means that to be highly-spirited, lively and exuberant with singing, dancing and cracking jokes is an un-womanly behaviour in the "red-eyes" of patriarchal hegemony. In the film, the speech of the lawyer Deepak (screened by Amitabh Bachchan) in the trial room beginning with "*Na ka matlab na hi hain*" (No means no) superbly lays bare different aspects of patriarchal hegemony and the "hints" that man takes for granted to assault or touch or harass a woman. This famous speech of Amitabh Bachchan, like Benare's last speech, is the ultimate message that the film *Pink* as well as Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* wants to present before this 21st century society.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

From the above analysis on Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*, it can easily be concluded that Benare is a victim of male sexual politics. She is harassed sexually and mentally by the hegemonic power structure. From the last speech or monologue of Benare at the end of the play, it can also be concluded that whenever a subaltern as female tries to speak (if she can at all) there is none to listen to her. None pays heed to her words. Naturally, when Benare, as a subaltern, delivers her final argument, the agents of patriarchy transform themselves into "mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century.... Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires." (Tendulkar 117) Her long speech becomes a monologue which begins with "Yes, I have a lot to say" (Tendulkar 116). Unfortunately, no ear of any cultured men of 21st

century is active enough to listen to her words. Benare speaks of her love, betrayal, joys and sorrows before the deaf and dumb of mortal remains of some cultured men. Not a single word enters their ears. This is the tragedy of a subaltern and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak justly raises the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" with all its implications. The assertion – subaltern cannot speak – does not mean that the physical act of speaking is impossible from within the subaltern position. The fact is that their utterances are never acknowledged as meaningful utterances. It is better to say that the subaltern cannot be heard. Actually, from within the position of subalternity it is impossible to generate discourse about his/her own desire, interest or self-identity. This is the characterizing feature of the subaltern position and this fundamental argument is found hidden in the very cryptic and powerful assertion that the subaltern cannot speak. The above assertion may be re-written as "subaltern can talk" but "subaltern cannot speak". The difference between "talking" and "speaking" would make the whole argument of Spivak very simple and clear. Speaking is inter-personal communication whereas talking is intra-personal communication. Therefore, Benare cannot speak rather her talking becomes a monologue at the end of the play.

It is also evident that Benare was silenced or subalternized or sexually harassed because she deviated from the traditional gender roles prescribed by patriarchal power structure. The combined force of gender issues, dominance, patriarchy and power-play works together for the subalternization of Benare and the resultant sexual harassment. Sexual harassment of financially independent working women is an extension of violence against women and is discriminative and exploitative in nature. Surveys as well as researches show that sexual harassment of working women is such a cruel offence that every working woman has experienced it at some point of instance, may be either in office or on their way to work or at other places. The cost of enduring it is physical and psychological break down. In India, it is still very much in existence today more than ever. It should not be overlooked or undermined as an "occupational hazards" which working women

should expect to endure. It is increasing day by day in India and the need is to provide such a mechanism that may better halt the situation and reduce down the number of cases. Besides constructive and qualitative research work is required in this respect for the better understanding of the dynamics of gender, power and harassment. In a nut shell, "silencing" should not be the only alternative left to women like Benare who possesses jest for life, financial freedom and not caring about patriarchal social norms and customs.

Recommendations to Root out Sexual Harassment.

The above analysis leads to the following recommendations which would definitely be helpful to reduce the cases or to root out sexual harassment.

- i. To aware the employees about the different aspects of sexual harassment and its legal provisions in government and private sectors.
- ii. To set up grievance cells in every sector to monitor the cases of sexual harassment.
- iii. Patriarchal social norms need to be deconstructed and re-constructed with the passage of time.
- iv. To organize seminars, workshops, plays by the competent authority to create more awareness on sexual harassment.
- v. To maintain a roster for promotion of female employee so that they are not harassed or exploited for promotion.
- vi. Qualitative research is required on sexual harassment for understanding the nature and causes of the problem.
- vii. Legal awareness programme should be arranged for the female workers to make them aware of their rights and privileges.

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