

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

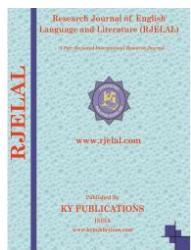
SOCIAL REALITY IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION

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doi: doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.73.355



ABSTRACT

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) has been one of the most renowned playwrights of not just Marathi, but Indian theatre for almost half a decade. Beginning his career as a dramatist he has twenty eight full length plays, twenty four one act plays and eleven children's drama to his name, a good number of which have been produced in English and major Indian languages. Tendulkar's writings reflect contemporary Indian society, its problems and challenges. The plays by him give the audience and readers a new awareness of the truth which is difficult to encounter. *Silence! The Court is in Session* is the play which earned him a place among leading Indian playwrights in the late sixties. There come to light the risks involved in having in society the practice of being 'man-centered' as opposed to that of being 'human-centered'. In the light of those risks, the paper tries to make an attempt to grasp the dramatist's view on the issue of exposing the hollowness of the middle class morality and dual standards of society.

Keywords: orthodox society, human relationships, character assassination, inner outburst, human-centered.

Majority of Tendulkar's plays are based on real life events and incidents that he himself has witnessed. The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) gets a stimulus from an amateur group of artists on its way to stage a mock-trial in Vile Parle (the suburb where the playwright lived) in Mumbai; the bits of conversation he heard as he guided the members to their destination suggested the outline of the play. Originally the play is written in Marathi. It was first produced in 1967 and subsequently became one of his widely staged play in different languages. The English version was staged in 1971. Priya Adarkar, the translator, has done a wonderful job by rendering the inherent meaning of the Marathi play with fidelity. A competent translator is supposed to show many attributes: a very good knowledge of the source language, an excellent knowledge of the target language, familiarity with the subject matter of

the text being translated, a finely tuned sense of when to metaphrase (word for word translation) and when to paraphrase (a saying in other words). At the very beginning, the translator keeps both the source and the target languages in mind and tries to translate carefully. But it becomes very difficult for a translator to decode the whole text literally; therefore, s/he takes the help of her/his own view and endeavours to translate accordingly. Sujit Mukherjee aptly remarks:

Absolute literal translation in any case is impossible in literature, whether of ancient works or of modern; ... Some allowance has also to be made for prevailing literary taste and scruples at the time when translation takes place. (22-23)

Thus, a translator is a bridge between cultures and civilizations. Reading translations of literary works written in other languages is one of the most fascinating modes of acquiring acquaintance with the unfamiliar and unknown world around. The best translations in world literature have happened when the translator has rendered works from other languages into her/his own. But in India, most of the translators render works from their mother tongue into English. It is very interesting to notice that in post-colonial India, the largest archive of translations has been assembled in English. The works in translation underline the importance of regional idiom and ethos and bring out the objective realisation and thematic expression of multifaceted India represented by many languages. The fact remains that Indian literature available in English language continues to be a living link between those who read and write literature in India. thus, it goes without saying that translation of regional writings in English has imparted the desired accessibility, appreciation and wider readership to them despite certain inherent demerits. The present paper takes English translation of Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi play *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)* by Priya Adarkar to put forward that translation offers the surviving impulse for any text by virtue of its supplementary and complementary characteristics. The paper is an attempt to show that the play highlights the extensions of dimensions of connectivity of socio-cultural and moral mores; and thus, provides a pan-Indian experience.

Silence! The Court is in Session is a "play within a play". The play acts as a connecting link because of its universality. The questions raised by Leela Benare, the protagonist, exist in all ages and societies. Tendulkar was much ahead of his age, aggressively candid in exposing the hollowness of the middle class morality and dual standards of society. The play has brought a turning point in Indian theatre as it shocks the sensibility of the conventional audience by projecting the reality of life, by making them aware of questions pertaining to human relationships. The brief outline of the story of *Silence!* goes as follows: a group of artists goes to a town to perform a play. A rehearsal of the play in which there is a mock-trial is arranged. In this mock-

trial, the private life of Leela Benare, the play's protagonist is revealed and publicly discussed. Here, Tendulkar presents a world apparently dominated by male chauvinists. However, the dramatic action revolves round the character of Leela Benare.

All the characters except Leela Benare are the representatives of the fundamentally orthodox society. The theatre group is a minuscule cross-section of middle-class society, the members representative of its different sub-strata. Their characters, dialogues, gestures, and even mannerisms reflect their petty, circumscribed existences. (Banerjee viii)

Frustrated and angry as they are in their individual lives, they go to the extent of maligning their companion also, for they are malicious and jealous in attitude towards their fellow-being. Leela Benare, with her zeal and zest for life, is totally different from them. She wants to share her happiness with others but hardly succeeds in doing so. Her companions fail to appreciate her jovial, generous nature. Benare's central role in the play overshadows the roles of her male counterparts.

It would be interesting to point out here that Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) challenges the popular belief that a woman's place is at 'home' only and that she should find fulfillment in motherhood. The worthy critic asserts that the core problem for woman is not sex but freedom which has always been denied to her. Friedan opines:

For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need. (282)

Vijay Tendulkar, though not a self-acknowledged feminist, seems to be in full agreement with the critic while portraying the character of Leela Benare. He treats the character of Benare with great compassion and understanding while pitting her against the men who are selfish, hypocritical, and brutally ambitious. Leela Benare, who is rebellious and assertive, is a school teacher. She performs her duty as a teacher very sincerely and commands love and respect of her pupils. She is also an enlightened artist. So, she

accepts the membership of the amateur theatre group. The other members of the group are the Kashikars, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Kamik, Prof. Damle, and Rawte who belong to the urban middle class of Mumbai.'

Benare, who is far different from others, is isolated. The co-actors cunningly arrange a cruel game in the form of a mock-trial. She is made the accused and the accusation against her is that of infanticide. Benare becomes a target of their gossip and becomes a victim ultimately to character assassination at their instance. During the proceedings of the mock-court, her companions deliberately reveal her illicit love affair with Prof. Damle, a married man. The love affair ultimately results in her pregnancy. Prof. Damle, however, is significantly absent at the time of trial. His absence denotes his total withdrawal from responsibility, either social or moral. At the time of rehearsal, the remarks in the book read by Samant, which are supposed to be Damle's (addressed to Benare), implicitly throw light on the culprit's escapist tendency: "Where you should go is entirely your problem. I feel great sympathy for you. But I can do nothing. I must protect my reputation" (Tendulkar, *Silence!* --- 45).

The court also summons Damle just as a witness, and not as an offender. Benare is made the prime accused for having pregnancy before marriage. She is cheated twice: first by his maternal uncle and later by Prof. Damle. Each time she is disillusioned by her male companions, for they love just her body and not her soul. However, in first case the guilty passes unnoticed, and hence unpunished. But in the second case Benare is caught in a trap. Each time she is victimised by her male counterparts. This is not the problem of Benare only, but the problem of almost all the women towards their social stance. It is through the portrayal of Benare that vices and weaknesses of society are exposed. In an interview, Tendulkar says:

When I show the struggle of a woman, it is not one woman's fight. The individual must have name and identity and caste and background to be credible, but she is not just a woman on stage, in particular play. I am, in

writing of her situation, showing that the possibility of a struggle against it exists.... By not giving a solution, I leave possibilities open, for whatever course the change may take. When the members of my audience go home and chew on the situation, they might be able to see their daughter or sister in the woman's position and come up with a way of changing the situation for her advantage. (Interview by Satya Saran and Vimal Patil)

Besides being a social satire, the play also comes as a scathing attack on existing judicial system. Miss Benare is held guilty on the basis of witnesses only. The play obliquely suggests that the present day justice is just a mockery. Throughout the rehearsal of a mock trial, Benare's co-actors try to console her by telling that this is only a mock trial meant just for fun. But the accusation used for this so-called rehearsal, that of infanticide turns into a verdict at the end. Through this game, they successfully resort to dissecting Miss Benare's character and thereby unearth her past and aggress upon her private life, for she is held guilty by the court that asks the school authorities to dismiss her from the job, and further orders that "you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed" (Tendulkar, *Silence!* 76). The mental agony she suffers is in no way less severe than the legal punishment. She is punished harshly, even disproportionately, and Prof. Damle the real culprit goes scot-free. In the mock trial, the stylistic gimmicks used by Ponkshe and Karnik sometimes speak more than their words. As witness and lawyers, the actors do not argue the case, but present the issue. The interrogation procedure is so convincing that it makes us realise that the legal professionals have been encouraging litigation more and more by giving impetus to disputes. There is a widespread belief both among the litigating public and the legislators that the intervention of lawyers in the court proceedings have the built-in tendency to delay the disposal of the cases. And the play reflects the same belief.

Benare's monologue/soliloquy in the end of the play is her inner outburst. She does not justify her stance; doesn't utter a single word. Whatever she intends to say is suppressed by the silence imposed

upon her by the court, and also by the society at large. Apart from all the criticism faced during the course of the play, Benare remains a lovely spark from the thunderbolt of Tendulkar.

The play does not depict any kind of problem, rather there are human situations. The play is thought-provoking and highly relevant as it discusses the present atrocities on women throughout India. The audience/readers are at once reminded of Jessica Lal murder case, Bhanwari Devi case, Delhi 'Nirbhaya' gang rape case, and so on. It prepares us to demand for the verdict and compels the elite society to ponder over the issue seriously. It goes without saying that the play really extends the dimensions of connectivity beyond the boundaries of time and place. Towards the end of the play is seen the beginning of the audience's/reader's consciousness. The play suggests that the injustice projected in society will go on repeating itself until this "man-centred" world becomes a "human-centred" (Waghmare 22) world.

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