



The conflict between self and Society: A study of Leela Benare in Tendulkar's Silence! The court is in Session

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Abstract: *This paper throws a light on the character of the protagonist Miss Leela Benare in Silence! The Court in Session. It exposes how modern women struggle between the desired personal life and the controlling customs and traditions in the society, and how women crave for real love.*

Key words: *Conspiracy, democratic, character, exploitation, publication*

Vijay Tendulkar was a leading contemporary Indian playwright, screen and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist, and social commentator. For the four decades he has been the influential dramatist and theatre personality in Marathi. Tendulkar has been active in the new theatre in Maharashtra, though his involvement with groups like RANGAYAN and AWISKAR, and others remains an activist in the ongoing struggle for democratic rights and civil liberties. He said "My creative writings including the plays and films I have written have mostly dealt or tried to deal with contemporary social reality. As a social being, I am against to all exploitation and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end."

With Tendulkar's production of *Silecne ! The court in Session* in 1967 he became the centre of a general controversy. He has already earned the appellation of the angry young man of Marathi theatre. But after this publication of drama he was definitely identified as a rebel against the established values of a fundamentally

orthodox society. The theatre group in *Silence! The court is in Session* that comes to a suburban village of Bombay to stage a play is a miniature cross section of the middle class society. The members of the group are representative of its sub strata. Their spiteful attitude to Leela Benare, the central character of the play that is their fellow artist reflects their malicious and spiteful attitudes towards their fellow beings. A well targeted conspiracy is hatched out against her and in the name of a mock trial, they expose and dissect her personal life and blight her psyche. Their attitude towards her reveals the basic hypocrisy and double standards of society. The play exposes the vulnerability of women in Indian society.

Leela Benare is the heroine of the play. She is the central character of the play. She symbolizes the emancipated modern woman. She is the most important and most powerful female character in the play . The entire play revolves around her. She is a young and energetic and fun loving. She is a member of the Sonar Moti Tenement Progressive Association, an amateur dramatic troupe in Bombay.



It is through miss Benare that we are introduced to the other characters like Kashikars, Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Prof. Damle, Karnik and Balu Rokde. She takes liberty with all her teammates making fun of them for granted which ultimately boomerangs on her.

Benare is a very talented young of woman of thirty four. She is a school teacher by profession. She is very frank, bold, assertive and rebellious. She is highly sociable and extrovert. She is very clever, sly and manipulative at times. She wants to be alone. As a teacher, she has dedicated herself to the uplift of her students. She has never been wanting in her duties. She has always maintained strict discipline. Her students adore her to the point of making her colleagues and the management jealous of her. She tells Samant:

“In school, when the first bell rings, my foot’s already on the threshold. I have not heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my teaching. I am never behindhand with my lessons! Exercises corrected on time, too. Not a bit of room for disapproval—I don’t give an inch of it to anyone.”

But in spite of all this, the school management is holding an enquiry. It is just because one of a slander. Benare questions the propriety of her management trying to mix up her personal life with profession. She feels that they should judge her only as a teacher for she has put her whole life into it. She has worn herself to a shadow in

that job. She has never hurt anyone except her own self. She says:

“Who are these people to say what can or can’t do? My life is my own – I have not sold it to anyone for a job! My will is my own. My wishes are my own. No one can kill those- no one! I’ll do what I like with myself and my life.”

Benare is all for life and wants to drink life to the less. So she rejects the social traditions and taboos that fetter her freedom. As she is different from others she pays for it heavily. She is easily isolated and made a victim of the cruel game cunningly planned by her troupe mates. Under the guise staging mock trial to make Samant familiar with the procedures of a court trail, they cry for her blood. Some of her colleagues in the dramatic troupe have a vague suspicion of her relationship with prof. Damle, a member of the troupe. Having this suspicion as their base, they develop it into a mountain making her trapped under it. They drag the skeletons in her cupboard and damage her psyche beyond repair.

Benare’s life of love always lands her in sorrow. She is in reality a victim of betrayal in love. Though she is thirty four, she remains a spinster. When she was just fifteen, she fell in love with her maternal uncle who praised her bloom every day. In their strict home, in the prime of her unfolding youth, he was the only one who came close to her. He gave her love when she was hardly fourteen. At her tender age she did not know what sin was. She insisted on marrying him so



that she could live her beautiful dream openly. But all her relatives including her mother were against it. And her uncle did not have the courage to marry her. He turned tail and ran. She tried to commit suicide but it failed. Later on when she grew up, she decided to be careful in her love affair. She fell in love with Prof. Damle for she adored his intellect. But he adored her body and made her pregnant. As he was a family man with children and a reputation to guard, he did not choose to marry her. He threw her like a hot brick.

Sukhatme who is acting as public prosecutor points out the crimes that the accused Leela Benare has committed against society. He talks about the sanctity of marriage and motherhood, the responsibility of a mother in rearing her children and the magic that a mother weaves to protect and preserve her offspring. In his speech, which is full of clichés and platitudes, Sukhatme declares that Miss Benare has brought shame to the pure and sacred motherhood by her immoral conduct:

“The woman who is accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood- which is purer than heaven itself. For that any punishment, however great, that the law may give her, will be too mild by far. The character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality. Not only that her conduct has blackened all social and moral values. The accused is public enemy number one. If such socially destructive tendencies are encouraged to flourish, this country and its culture will be totally destroyed.”

Miss Benare's crime is further compounded as she is an unwed mother. She is guilty of promiscuity too. The charge against her is infanticide. Sukhatme says that motherhood without marriage has always been considered a great sin by our religion and by our traditions. He further draws the attention of the mock court how unwed motherhood will pull down the institution of marriage to the dust and become a breeding ground of immorality.

Benare wants to bring up the baby with the protection of a father, home and security. So she tries to woo Panksh. But he turns down the proposal for he does not prefer to be a social reformer by becoming the father of a child born to another man. Then she tries to woo Balu Rokde by telling him that he can become free from the humiliating slavery under Mrs. Kashikar. But he also turns down the offer. Then she tries in futile to bait Samant. Her frantic effort to piece her broken love life together is mistaken by traditionalists like Mr and Mrs. Kashikar and Sukhatme for promiscuity. They look on Benare as a potential danger to the institution of marriage and sacred nature of motherhood. They consider that woman is not fit for independence. Motherhood without marriage has always been considered a very great sin by religion and traditions.

Delivering the verdict of the mock court Kashikar addresses Benare: the crimes you have committed are most terrible. There is no forgiveness for them. Your sin must be expiated. Irresponsibility must be chained down. Social customs are all



of supreme importance.marriage is the very foundation of our society's stability. Motherhood must be sacred and pure. This court takes a serious view of your attempt to dynamite all this.

Thus Sukhatme and Kashikar become the playwright's critics for the new generations' promiscuous ways, though Benare insists that her professional life as a teacher must be considered separately and not be mixed up with her private life. According to Benare the society has no right to interfere in her personal life. However, she cannot escape the consequences of her personal actions as long as she is a part of the society she lives in.

Tendulkar seems to have adapted the model of naturalistic drama. But the integration of the play within a play creates an additional dimension where the demarcating line between reality and illusion. Tendulkar discusses the struggle between self and the society. Benare's character shows the importance of being individual in the orthodoxical society. Fulfilling one's desires is more important than any other thing in life. After all there is no point in living if we don't feel alive.

Reference:

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