



## Confronting Gender Bias And Societal Injustice: A Realistic Study Of “Silence! The Court Is In Session” By Vijay Tendulkar

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**Abstract:** ‘Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe’ is a 1967 Marathi play by Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar. The play is translated into English by Priya Adarkar. First performed in 1971 at the Museum Theatre, Madras, the play is a portrayal of unjust societal behaviour, a criticism of the social and gender injustice faced by women. This research paper aims to dwell into the heart of the orthodox Indian mindset and the realistic interpretation of aspects of rape, violence against women, mockery of human trauma, Kama or mental pleasure, misogyny and sexual objectification. By referring to parallel texts, we see various dimensions and facets of the play that were unexplored with the first reading of the actual play. By analyzing the play alongside real-world examples, the paper highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the persistence of patriarchal norms. Tendulkar's work is a powerful critique of societal attitudes and continues to resonate as a call for introspection and change.

‘Silence! The Court is in Session’ is a “**play within a play**.” The play questions the stock notions of morality. It attacks the hypocrisy of basically weak but arrogantly cruel yet friendly people ever so eager to lynch a woman who happens to violate their moral code.<sup>1</sup> The play unfolds in a mock trial where Ms Benare, a school teacher who tries to make an independent mark in the patriarchal world, is accused of infanticide. It **emerges from an actual incident and not from a concept**. The ideas and questions raised in the play exist in all walks of life. 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 and making them aware of questions about human relationships.<sup>2</sup>

The brief outline of the story of Silence! It goes as follows: a group of artists goes to a town to perform a play. A rehearsal of the play, in which a mock trial is arranged, is also conducted. In this mock trial, the private life of Leela Benare, is revealed and publicly discussed without her consent. It unleashed characters in a state of collision with accepted norms and on the other, and revealed ineffectual middle-class types with an ugly, vicious leer lurking under a smug surface.<sup>3</sup> She inadvertently becomes a target of their gossip, emerging from jealousy and the so called “moral fabric” of the society.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.fergusson.edu/upload/document/15526\\_Kaleidoscope.pdf](http://www.fergusson.edu/upload/document/15526_Kaleidoscope.pdf) 2014, Dr. Shubhangi Raykar, The Text, the Performance and the Translation Across Cultures: A study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rjelal.com/7.3.19/355-358%20Dr.%20USHA%20MANDHAN.pdf> Social reality in Vijay Tendulkar's silence! The Court is in session with Dr Usha Mandhan.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

Vijay Tendulkar's depiction of the grim and hidden realities of societal mentality and prejudice comes to light. The characters of the play, who supposedly come from a cross-section of middle-class society, are pathetically handicapped with their own limitations.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, they attack Benare more severely because **she attains a greater level of self-confidence and mental clarity that they wish to have but cannot attain.**<sup>5</sup>

Comparing the play to real-life scenarios, it highlights the conservative mentality and orthodox thinking of the amateurs enacting the mock trial. The lines of Mrs. Kashikar, "*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, cracks jokes! And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out!*"<sup>6</sup> reveal a misogynistic perspective of society in India and the stigmatization faced day in and day out.

A deeper study of the mock trial revealed that Ms. Benare was subjugated to the mockery. **It was a "mock" trial in the truest sense.** With or without the intention, the amateur artists in the trial have put immense burden and bias on Ms. Benare.

The play, when scrutinized, brings to light the working of the criminal judicial system, a mockery of the human existence and a mockery of the double standards of society. Benare is tormented and humiliated, but instead of adopting the strategy of withdrawal, she seeks confirmation and assimilation. She owns the identity of her child with the exceptional strength of spirit and intends to preserve the sublimity of motherhood.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, women face prejudice and hatred in many minor ways, which are not brought to light by the patriarchal society. In light of Kama or mental pleasure, it is a paradox that in the second most populated country, which developed Kama Sutra (literature on sex) for the world, sex is considered a taboo. The context of history played a major role in this contradiction. Sex was not considered a stigma in ancient times but "Victorian values stigmatized sexual liberalism in India". Conservatism has since become a part of India and sex became a topic prohibited discussion topic.<sup>8</sup>

Viewing this play in the **context of rape and violence against women**, some similarities among societal mentality emerge. Referring to socio-political dimensions in society, the *social learning theory of rape* holds rape as a learned behaviour. The theory states that a man imitates the violence against women as he observes in real life or in media. Men learn to associate sex and violence by watching violent and pornographic films or visiting Internet sites. In addition, myths related to rape promoted by a misogynistic society somehow justifies and glorifies rape. Lastly, there is a desensitization effect associated with rape. The moral integrity of the victim is taken into question and not of the perpetrator.<sup>9</sup>

In the opening scene, Miss Leela Benare tries to attract Samant, a local boy, by saying that she likes him very much. Ms. Benare goes close to him when they are alone in the room. It is a common practice of patriarchal society to consider woman in association with man. The common consideration is that a man protects a woman throughout her life. For example, the father, the husband and her son. In the patriarchal society, a single woman cannot do anything without getting help from a man. **Men often consider women as goddesses, but whenever the matter of treatment arises, they simply exploit them.**<sup>10</sup>

Dissecting the play based on realistic aspects, the sheer ignorance towards women comes to the surface. The play highlights the torment women face through the following lines '*she runs after men too much*', '*the*

<sup>4</sup> Silence! The Court Is In Session by Vijay Tendulkar

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.csu-guruvayoor.edu.in/studymaterial/s3subjects/s3p4literature.pdf> S III Literature Paper IV

<sup>6</sup> Supra (n4)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1133228.pdf> Gender Manifestation in Tendulkar's silence The Court Is In Session by Shruthi. T., 2017.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261637776\\_The\\_Problem\\_of\\_Rape\\_in\\_India\\_A\\_Multi-dimensional\\_Analysis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261637776_The_Problem_of_Rape_in_India_A_Multi-dimensional_Analysis) Radha R Sharma, The Problem Of Rape In India: A Multidimensional Analysis

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24701029> Socio political dimensions of rape by Sarbhani Guha Ghosal

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.englishjournals.com/assets/archives/2017/vol3issue1/2-6-33-596.pdf> Women's suffering in Vijay Tendulkar's silence: The Court is in session by Dr. Ashok P Khairnar and Dinesh B Deore

*prisoner sometimes acts as if she were off her head,' 'that is there's sometimes no sense at all in her action.'*<sup>11</sup>

By comparing the stereotypical outlook of the characters to real life judgements or decrees of the Court, we see a shocking revelation. Controversial statements by judges are not new in India. The concept of consent is viewed in a deeply flawed manner. The acting troupe traumatizes Ms. Benare by not letting her voice be heard. The Latin maxim, '*Audi Alteram Partem*' is not followed in the mock trial. Ms. Benare is not given a fair chance and is dominated by the men in the trial. Mr. Kashikar, the judge is not impartial in the current scenario. He considers one side only and does injustice to Ms. Benare. The lines from his verdict, "*If anyone has ruined our society, it's Agarkar and Dhondo Keshav Karve.*" highlight the favouritism towards the males. The mock trial court zeros down on Ms. Benare's age and her marriage, ignoring the involvement of men in her crime.

Trying to analyze what inspired Vijay Tendulkar to include the aspect of courts in the play, one can look at actual judgements of the Court. One of them is as follows: "*If the parties are in some kind of prohibited relationship, then also it would be difficult to lay down a general principle that an **emphatic 'no'** would only communicate the intention of the other party. ... and if, in the past, there have been physical contacts. In such cases, it would be really difficult to decipher whether **little or no resistance and a feeble 'no'**, was actually a denial of consent.*"<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, another viewpoint to consider and reflect upon is the male-oriented society, women are seen as sexual objects. "*In Silence! the Court is in Session*" Leela Benare's body is used by her maternal uncle and Prof. Damle. Both the men do not want to carry out further duties rather they practice the traditional approach of treating women as sexual object.

This conduct is not only followed by the male counterpart, but also by institutions. men "sort" women sexually, drawing on gender meanings of sexuality to make distinctions about women's sexual "worth" and potential impact, as intimacy partners, on masculine status. This sexual sorting of women helps men resolve dilemmas associated with gendered and classed sexuality within a young adult and collegiate context.<sup>13</sup> Sexual objectification is highlighted in the play in various contexts when Ms. Benare approaches Samant at the start of the play, later when she is silenced and dragged to the witness box by Mrs. Kashikar and finally Ms. Benare's declaration when she confesses to an affair with Prof. Damle. The lines, "*He wasn't a God. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! ...This body is a swindler!*" convey what Ms. Benare went through, when she was deprived of a healthy relationship. Dissimilar to Benare Mrs. Kashikar has promptly acknowledged man-made social codes and inflexibility of male-controlled society maybe as a safeguard for her failure to bear any children that is a torture enough in an Indian culture. She is both a casualty just as an augmentation of man centric thinking.<sup>14</sup>

Vijay Tendulkar's "Silence! The Court is in Session" remains a significant and relevant work in the context of modern societal issues. The play's realistic depiction of the biases and injustices faced by women serves as a mirror to the broader societal mindset, revealing the deep-seated misogyny and moral hypocrisy that still persist. Through the character of Leela Benare, Tendulkar exposes the harsh realities of being a woman in a patriarchal society, where even the justice system is skewed against her.

<sup>11</sup> Supra (n4)

<sup>12</sup> <https://articles.manupatra.com/article-details/An-Extensive-study-of-Rape-Laws-in-India> An Extensive Study of Rape Laws in India by Tejaswini Mallick

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/symbinte.37.3.369> Masculine Status, Sexual Performance, and the Sexual Stigmatization of Women by Brian N. Sweeney

<sup>14</sup> DEPICTION OF WOMAN IN "SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION" by Dr. Rohini Arya Verma, Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches In Allied Education

*“On some positions, cowardice asks the question “Is it safe?”  
Expediency asks the question, “Is it polite?”  
And vanity comes along and asks the question “Is it popular?”  
But conscience asks the question, “Is it right?”  
And there comes a time when one must take a position  
That is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular,  
But he must do it because conscience tells him it is right”.*

The above quote of Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr. compels one to reflect on what matters most to us, individually as well as collectively. I would like to conclude by stating that even though the stereotypical mindset is gradually evolving for the good, it is still not eradicated. Practices of dowry, sati, torture of the female body, sexual objectifying, and rape still exist. It would require a collective effort, persisting for decades to come, to try and change the misogynistic mindset of people.

