

THE PLAYWRIGHT AS A SOCIAL CRITIC: A CRITICAL STUDY OF VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION*.

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I have written about my own experiences and about what I have seen in others around me. I have been true to all this and have not cheated my generation. I did not attempt to simplify matters and issues for the audience when presenting my plays, though that would have been easier occupation My plays ... contain my perceptions of society and its value and I cannot write what I do not perceive. (Vijay Tendulkar 'Afterword ', *Kanyadaan* 71).

Of all the literary genres, drama can be considered the most appealing and the most splendid literary genre. As a visual and composite art, it remarkably illustrates the magnificent saga of human life in varied forms and manifestations. By turning an actual reality into an excellent aesthetic experience, drama proves to be one of the best audiovisual mediums of expression. As a powerful literary composition and effective medium of communication, it unfolds in a picturesque manner the moral, ethical, religious, philosophical, social, cultural and political thoughts and views of the countries the world over. Being deeply associated with the inner consciousness of the human race, it represents man's hopes, aspirations, visions, ideas, objectives, joys and sorrows with great insight. While discussing the multitudinous nature of drama and theatre, Bharata in his world-famous book, *Natyashastra* states: "Theatre is life. There is no art, no craft, no learning, no yoga, no action, which cannot be seen in it" (qtd in Rangacharya 35). As the highest form of artistic expression, drama is not only a delightful source of entertainment but also a powerful vehicle of instruction and illumination.

Drama in India has a rich and glorious tradition. Being hailed as the 'Fifth Veda', it encompasses the "whole arc of life, ranging from the material to the spiritual, the phenomenal to the transcendental and provide[s] at once relaxation and entertainment, instruction and illumination" (K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar 1). The glorious works of Sanskrit dramatists such as Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Vishakhadatta and Bhavabhooti are material proof of the splendid dramatic heritage of India. Traditional or folk dramas which flourished after the decline of the Sanskrit theatrical activities were written in several regional languages. Indian dramas in Indian languages and the dramas in English translation have registered a tremendous growth in the recent decades. The translations of the regional plays into English have doubtless established a firm link between one regional language and another and this has led to an exploration of Indian aesthetics, sensibility and cultural heritage.

The Indian playwrights turn to Indian myths, epics, legends, history, folk literature, and dramatic traditions not only for inspiration but also for effective presentation of

contemporary social, cultural and political problems and conflicts in their plays. Several Indian playwrights seem to have been greatly influenced by Western thinkers and playwrights such as Sartre, Camus, Brecht, G.B. Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov, Eliot, Ionesco, Pirandello, Pinter and Beckett. Moreover, the Indian writers have achieved a thorough synthesis of all the three distinguished traditions namely classical, folk and contemporary Western which has resulted in the discovery of a new form as well as a new style of production. Aided by a perfect blending of Western intellectual consciousness and Indian theatrical techniques, the contemporary Indian dramatists in English experiment with innovative themes and methods of handling situations, character delineation, tone and expression in dialogue, stage craft and technical virtuosity. Modern playwrights such as Asif Currimbhoy, Mahesweta Devi, Pratap Sharma, Gurcharan Das, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Shiv Subramanian, Tanika Gupta and Lakhan Deb have enriched the Indian drama and theatre immensely. Among the post-Independence playwrights who have made bold experiments in the area of theatrical art and who continue to remain torch bearers of a new resurgence of the contemporary Indian drama are Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Girish Karnad in Kannada.

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) is undeniably a great Indian playwright who is known for his multifaceted creative genius. As a versatile and prolific Marathi writer he has authored twenty-eight full length dramas, twenty-four one-act plays, and eleven plays for children. Besides being an acclaimed dramatist, he is well-known for his literary essays, political journalism, screen and television writings, translated works and social commentaries. He has also written novels and several short stories. Despite his interest and involvement in different social, political and literary activities, his genius finds full expression only in dramas. For his vast dramatic output and avant garde theatrical activities in Marathi, he has been honored with several prestigious awards including the Maharashtra State Government Award, the Sangeet Natak Akademy Award, Padma Bhushan Award and the Katha Chudamani Award. His writing career has spanned more than fifty years and several of his plays have, in fact, become true classics in Marathi and they have been translated into English and other Indian languages.

Tendulkar occupies a unique place in the history of contemporary theatre and he is different from other playwrights because of his experimentation not only with the subject matter but also with the form and structure of the drama. Though his innovative dramatic techniques and experimental methods in the presentation of varied themes have brought new authenticity and power to the highly orthodox Marathi theatre, his treatment of socially controversial themes and his unconventional approach to human problems in his plays have made him a controversial writer. As a renowned writer of realistic dramas, he often electrifies the conservative audiences with brutal themes and forthright dialogues. Being a very sensitive writer, he observes the social, political, cultural and moral degeneration of contemporary society and presents it in his plays with thorough detachment and clinical dispassion. In his plays he deals with the themes of love, sex, marriage, violence, gender inequality, social inequality, power games, alienation and individual isolation. While exploring the depths of human life and its complexities, he does not fail to expose the

hypocrisy, promiscuity and emptiness of value systems found in the traditional Indian middle-class society. By using the techniques of satire, irony, pathos and mock-element effectively he criticizes the middle-class mindset and its conventional attitude towards life. Deeply influenced by “real life experiences, hearsay, news items, films, plays and literature in general” (Arundhati Banerjee), Tendulkar portrays the physical sufferings and mental agonies which arise out of man’s conflict with the hostile surroundings in which he lives. With the vision of a social scientist, he analyses human angst and predicament extensively in his plays. He depicts not only the confrontation between the society and the individual but also modern man’s total failure to understand either himself or others in the society. Tendulkar himself admits:

Man is a complex phenomenon; any attempt at simplification through generalization would be foolish. I fear it also falsifies the picture. I wouldn’t do that. It’s an obsession with me to capture human behaviour, elusive and ever changing. At every stage, what I perceived has been reflected in my work. It’s not that I am writing now on a conclusion reached long ago (Gowri Ramnarayan). (152)

Obviously his approach to life is quite affirmative and his unswerving commitment to human values is found in all his plays. Among the plays written by Tendulkar the most popular and prominent are *Shantata Court Chalu Aahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Gidhade (The Vultures)* and *Ghashiram Kotwal (Ghashiram the Constable)*.

Silence! The Court is in Session (1967), one of Tendulkar’s finest dramatic works, is a play originally written in Marathi and later translated into English by Priya Adarkar. Known for its artistic ingenuity and resourcefulness the play “combines social criticism with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society” (Arundhati Banerjee xviii). It won awards including the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Award in 1970 and Sangeet Natak Akademy Award in 1971 and brought both national and international recognition to the playwright. The play originated from a real life incident in which Tendulkar happened to overhear a group of amateur players whom he was guiding to their destination, Vile Parle, the Mumbai suburb in which he lived, where the group was going to stage a mock-trial. The play is in three Acts and it is a powerful satire on the shallow conventions and the shameful hypocrisy of the middle-class male-dominated society and also the deplorable legal system found in contemporary society. By using the techniques of dramatic irony and satire effectively, the playwright portrays how a young woman suffers a lot and undergoes deep mental agony when she is betrayed by the other members of the group.

The members of an amateur theatre group called “The Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association” come to a suburban village near Bombay to stage their play on the trial of American President Lyndon B. Johnson on the charge of producing atomic weapons. The primary aim of the amateur theatre is to educate the public with current social problems and issues which affect contemporary society seriously. The association has chosen to educate the public on the procedures of a court of law by staging a mock-trial. The members represent a small cross-section of middle-class urban society. In the words of Arundhati Banerjee: “Their characters, dialogues, gestures and even mannerisms reflect their

petty, circumscribed existences fraught with frustrations and repressed desires that find expression in their malicious and spiteful attitudes towards their fellow beings" (viii).

Mr. Kashikar, known for his pretensions of social upliftment and enlightenment, is the chairman of the drama troupe. Without any independent thinking and individual stature, Mrs. Kashikar follows her husband like a shadow. Since the couple is childless and "nothing should happen to either of them in their bare, bare house -- and that they should not die of boredom!" (*Silence!*.. 6) they have brought up and educated an orphan, Balu Rokde, whom they treat as a slave. Sukhatme is a briefless lawyer who "just sits alone in the barrister's room at court, swatting flies with legal precedents! And in his tenement, he sits alone killing houseflies" (6). Ponkshe who has failed twice in his Inter Science Examination works as a clerk in the Central Telegraph Office. Karnik is an actor in the experimental theatre with his pretensions of being an expert on 'Intimate Theatre'. Rawte has not turned up and he is replaced by Samant, a local resident. Damle is a professor "who prides himself on his book-learning. But when there's a real-life problem, away he runs!" (6-7). He is not attending today's programme.

The only exception in the group is Leela Benare who happens to be the central character of the play. She is a young school teacher and through her consciousness, the hypocrisy of the male-dominated middle-class society and its brutal hostility against women is exposed. Benare is young, energetic, vivacious rebellious and individualistic and defies established social conventions and dictates.

Leela Benare and Samant are the first to arrive at the village hall where the actors are to stage a 'Mock Law Court'. While talking about her teaching career, she tells Samant: "In school, when the first bell rings, my foot's already on the threshold. I haven't heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my teaching. I'm never behind-hand with my lessons! Exercises corrected on time, too! Not a bit of room for disapproval -- I don't give an inch of it to any one!" (3-4). Then she tells him about the impeccable, candid and outspoken nature of children in the school: "They're so much better than adults. At least they don't have that blind pride of thinking they know everything. There's no nonsense stuffed in their heads. They don't scratch you till you bleed, then run away like cowards" (4). While talking about the relationship between her and her students in the class, she tells him: "In class, I never sit when teaching. That's how I keep my eye on the whole class. No one has a chance to play up. My class is scared stiff of me! And they adore me, too. My children will do anything for me. For I'd give the last drop of my blood to teach them"(4). She tells Samant that because of her efficiency in her teaching work and the enviable attachment of her students to her, other teachers and the management are unjustifiably jealous of her. She says: "But what can they do to me? What can they do? However hard they try, what can they do? They're holding an enquiry, if you please! But my teaching's prefect. I've put my whole life into it -- I've worn myself to a shadow in this job! Just because of one bit of slander, what can they do to me? Throw me out? Let them! I haven't hurt anyone. Anyone at all! If I've hurt anybody, it's been myself. But is that any kind of reason for throwing me out? Who are these people to say what I can or can't do? My life is my own -- I haven't 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! I'll decide"(5). These words reveal the assertive, independent, bold, indomitable and individualistic nature of Miss. Benare. Then she makes to Samant sarcastic remarks about Mr. Kashikar, Mrs. Kashikar, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponkshe and Professor Damle.

Benare is sometimes a naughty, childish, mischievous and fun-loving woman. When she tries to entertain other actors she is scolded by Sukhatme. She tells him: "But I don't see why one should go around all the time with a long face. Or a square face! Like that Ponkshe! We should laugh, we should play, we should dance too. Shouldn't have any false modesty or dignity. Or care for anyone! I mean it. When your life's over, do you think anyone will give you a bit of theirs? What do you say, Samant? Do you think they will?" (8). She further tells Samant "I say it -- I, Leela Benare, a living woman, I say it from my own experience. Life is not meant for anyone else. It's your own life. It must be. It's a very, very important thing. Every moment, every bit of it is precious" (8).

Except Professor Damle and Rawte, all the other actors have arrived. Professor Damle is unable to join them as he is busy with a symposium in the university. Rawte is absent because he is sick with flu. Sukhatme tells Kashikar that he will play the roles of both the counsel for the prosecution and that of the accused. Then Samant is asked to play the role of Rawte and thus he becomes the fourth witness in the 'Mock Law Court'. Since they have already staged the atomic weapons trial seven times in the past three months they feel that they need not have the rehearsal before the show. Ironically it is Benare who suggests the idea that a different play other than the atomic weapons trial should be performed. They finally decide to stage a mock-trial in order to make Samant understand the intricacies of court procedure.

Arrangements are being made to perform the mock-trial or the 'play-within-the play'. When Benare goes into the inner room to wash her face Ponkshe and Karnik who have some knowledge of Benare's personal life conspire against her. Finally, at Sukhatme's suggestion, they all decide to make Benare the 'accused' in the mock-trial. Mrs. Kashikar too supports the idea by saying: "We'll be able to see what the trial of a woman is like" (22). When Benare comes out of the inner-room fresh, singing a song Ponkshe tells her: "Miss Leela Benare, you have been arrested on suspicion of a crime of an extremely grave nature and brought as a prisoner before the bar of this court" (23). Benare is terribly shocked. Unable to understand what is happening, "she looks around her numbly" (23). Kashikar assuming the role of the judge addresses Benare: "Prisoner Miss Benare, under section 302 of the Indian Penal Code you are accused of the crime of infanticide" (23-24). Benare is greatly stunned on hearing this unexpected charge and the whole atmosphere becomes incredibly serious and grim. In order to throw more light on the case Kashikar, the judge, says "The question of infanticide is one of great social significance. That's why I deliberately picked it. We consider society's best interests in all we do" (26). Then he asks Benare whether she is guilty of the charge that has been brought against her. Benare tells the judge "I plead not guilty. I couldn't even kill a common cockroach. I am scared to do it. How could I kill a new born child?" (30). The distinction between the fictitious accused and the real-life one ceases to exist and the mock-trial begins to assume sinister dimensions. Benare is terribly crushed and

humiliated by others under the ostentation that the trial is nothing but a game. As the counsel for prosecution, Sukhatme begins his argument which reflects spontaneously the views of the male-dominated society.

Milord the nature of the charge brought against the accused is a most terrible one. Motherhood is a sacred thing -- ... Motherhood is pure. Moreover, there is greater nobility in our concept of motherhood. We have acknowledged woman as the mother of mankind. Our culture enjoins us to perpetual worship of her. 'Be thy mother as a god' is what we teach our children from infancy. There is great responsibility devolving upon a mother. She weaves a magic circle with her whole existence in order to protect and preserve her little one. (30)

He further explains the seriousness of the crime:

Considering this, what would we respectable citizens say if any woman were to take the life of the delicate bundle of joy she has borne? We would say, there could be no baser or more devilish thing on earth. I intend to establish by means of evidence that the prisoner has done this same vile deed. (31)

Ponkshe the first witness tells the judge that though Benare is a school teacher by profession and remains unmarried to the public eye "she runs after men too much" (33). The next witness Balu Rokde tells the court that he saw Benare in Professor Damle's hostel room during the night time in a compromising position. Now the mock-trial has become a serious trial in real life. Benare who has so far been playful and frivolous slowly begins to understand that she has become the real target of their blood-thirsty game. Rokde further states that Professor Damle deliberately refused to meet him because Miss Benare was there. Based on the evidence given by Rokde, Sukhatme tells the judge. "Even to an impartial observer, it reveals that Miss Benare's behavior is certainly suspicious" (39). Realizing very well that she has landed in a terrible scandal Benare bursts out in anger: "If you like, I'll give you the names and addresses of twenty-five more people with whom I am alone at times. Holding a trial, are you? Suspicious, indeed. You don't even understand the meaning of simple words!"(40).

Then Samant is called in as a witness. Though he says that he has never known Professor Damle and he has known Miss Benare only for two hours, he is urged by Sukhatme and others to use his imagination to give some evidence against Benare. Sukhatme tells him: "Mr Samant, for the sake of the trial, we're taking some things for granted." (43). Karnik tells him: "The crime is imaginary ... that's what it is" (43). Ponkshe says: "Only the accused is real!" (43). As one who has read some cheap romances Samant cleverly fabricates an evidence against Benare. He tells the judge that Professor Damle and Miss Benare were inside the room. The door was locked from inside. He had gone to Professor Damle's hostel room to invite him for a lecture. But Professor Damle refused to talk to him and shut the door. When the door was shut he did not know what to do. At that time he heard someone crying inside the room and "it was a woman" (44). He then tells the counsel that the woman

who was crying asked Professor Damle “If you abandon me in this condition, where shall I go?” (45). Then he heard Professor Damle answering:

Where should you go is entirely your problem. I feel great sympathy for you. But I can do nothing. I must protect my reputation”. Then the woman was heard saying “that’s all you can talk about, your reputation? How heartless you are! (45).

For this Professor Damle replied, “Nature is heartless”. The woman further said, “If you abandon me, I shall have no choice but to take my life ... Bear it in mind that you will not escape the guilt of murdering two....two living beings” (45).

Benare becomes furious, tense and stunned. Unable to tolerate the deposition made by Samant, Benare bursts out in anger: “That’s enough! ... It’s all a lie! A complete lie! ... This has got to stop! Not a word of it is true! ... It’s all made up! It’s a lie! ... You’re telling barefaced lies! (45-46). Then Samant tells the counsel that whatever he has spoken has been taken away from the book which he has hidden behind him. Finding herself in a cruel and pathetic situation, Benare accuses all of them saying “You’ve all deliberately ganged upon me! You’ve plotted against me!” (46). She cannot bear this situation any more. Her eyes are filled with tears. She is unable to speak because her voice is choked. She is tense and agitated. She then takes up her bag and tries to leave the place. She tries to open the door. The door does not open because it is locked from outside. She now realizes that she is trapped in the hall where her tormentors are ready to tear her flesh bit by bit by way of conducting a mock-trial. They have finally decided to continue the trial till the arrival of the villagers.

Miss Benare then is summoned to the witness box. Benare refuses to move. Mrs. Kashikar pulls her along forcefully to the witness box. Benare’s face shows “the terror of a trapped animal” (50). Sukhatme asks her questions. But Benare stands silent and does not respond to his questions. Mrs. Kashikar then steps into the witness box and tells the counsel that Benare though thirty-four remains unmarried because she gets “everything without marrying.” (53) She further adds, “It’s the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That’s how promiscuity has spread throughout our society” (54). She also gives the information that Benare went off with Damle after the performance. She also reveals that Professor Damle is a family man with five children. Balu Rokde then testifies. He confesses that eight days ago after the performance at Dombivli when he and Miss. Benare were left alone the latter took his hand in the dark. He told her that it was not proper and then he freed his hand. “She moved away. She said, ‘Don’t tell anyone what happened’ ” (57). Ponkshe as a witness testifies against Benare again. He tells the ‘mock-judge’ that when he met Benare in a hotel she expressed her desire to marry him as she had just been through a “shattering heartbreak” (63). He also came to know from Benare how Professor Damle was responsible for the child which she is now carrying in her womb and how he had refused to marry her. She also told him that “she worshipped that man’s intellect. But all he understood was her body” (63). He also tells the judge that he saw her carrying a bottle of TIK 20 in her bag. On hearing the words of Ponkshe in the ‘mock-court’ Benare sits “like a block of stone, drained of colour and totally desolate” (60). But everyone is happy that “the cat’s out of the bag!” (63) at last.

Karnik then enters the witness box and informs the court that Benare proposed marriage to Balu with the view that he could be independent and free from the control of Kashikars. She also made a promise to him that she would support him financially if he married her. But Balu turned down her proposal saying "I am scared. And if I marry you when you're in this condition, the whole world'll sling mud at me. No one in my family's done a thing like that" (65). He further informs the court that he has recently learnt from a common friend that "the accused attempted suicide because of a disappointment in love. She fell in love at the age of fifteen, with her own maternal uncle! That's what ended in disappointment" (66). Benare becomes terribly upset and struggles to her feet and tries to reach the door. But Mrs. Kashikar grasps her and forces her physically back to the dock.

By setting aside the court tradition, Mr. Kashikar, the judge of the mock-trial, expresses his desire to be openly examined as a witness. Standing in the witness box, he tells Sukhatme, the counsel for prosecution, that Nanasaheb Shinde, the Chairman of the Education Society, Bombay, has already decided to dismiss Benare from her service. He tells the lawyer that he heard Nanasaheb talking to someone on the phone angrily: "It is a sin to be pregnant before marriage. It would be still more immoral to let such a woman teach, in such a condition! There is no alternative -- this woman must be dismissed" (69). Dazed by the revelations made by Kashikar, Benare tries to drink the deadly poison TIK – 20 but she is at once prevented from doing so by Karnik.

Now the counsel for prosecution, Sukhatme, presents his case. His argument reveals the patriarchal views of the traditional middle-class society regarding women and motherhood. He says that Benare "has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood -- which is purer than heaven itself" (70). According to him the conduct of the accused "has blackened all social and moral values" and she has now become "public enemy number one" (71). He further argues that though "the charge against the accused is one of infanticide" she "has committed a far more serious crime" i.e., unmarried motherhood. He adds:

Motherhood without marriage has always been considered a very great sin by our religion and our traditions. Moreover, if the accused's intention of bringing up the offspring of this unlawful maternity is carried to completion, I have a dreadful fear that the very existence of society will be in danger. There will be no such thing as moral values left. (71)

He continues to say that "the accused has plotted to dynamite the very roots of our tradition, our pride in ourselves, our culture and our religion" (71). He upholds the patriarchal principle that 'woman is not fit for independence'. According to him Miss Benare is not fit for independence and he requests the judge not to show any mercy but to give her "the greatest and severest punishment for her terrible crime" (71). As the defence counsel in the case, Sukhatme weakly defends Benare's actions saying human beings are prone to error. He faintly requests the judge to view her case with mercy.

Mr. Kashikar asks Benare whether she has anything to say about the charge made against her. The stunned and motionless Benare stands up erect and says: "Yes, I have a lot to say" (72). What follows is a long speech in which she pours out from her heart which has been tightly closed for several years. After realizing that the secret of her personal life has been cleverly and cunningly exposed by the co-actors through the 'mock-trial' she is now able to prevail over her sense of embarrassment and lays bare her suppressed feelings frankly and fearlessly. Though her speech is marked with deep sighs and moans she does not fail to present her point of view in an admirable manner. She openly admits that she had to face difficulties and suffer from frustration and dilemmas at different stages in her past life. She says: "My life was a burden to me ... But when you can't lose it, you realize the value of it. You realize the value of living" (72). Though she had a lot of zest and gusto for life she found that there was a great joy in suicide. "It's greater even than the pain of living" (73). Expressing her own philosophy of life she says, "Life is a book that goes ripping into pieces. Life is a poisonous snake that bites itself. Life is a betrayal. Life is a fraud. Life is a drug. Life is drudgery. Life is a something that's nothing -- or a nothing that's something" (73). Then in utter desperation she tells the judge: "Milord, life is a very dreadful thing. Life must be hanged" (73). She then recounts how people who have lived around her have drastically failed to understand her inner feelings and even her biological urges. She says: "Only one thing in life is all-important -- the body! You may deny it, but it is true" (73).

Recalling what she did in the school as a teacher, she narrates that she taught the children beauty and purity. "I cried inside, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair, and I taught them hope" (73). As a typical modern and emancipated woman Benare questions the validity of dismissing her from her job. She asks: "For what sin are they robbing me of my job, my only comfort? My private life is my own business. I'll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to!" (73). She considers men to be hypocrites whose interest lies only in the body of a woman and not in her sufferings. While commenting on her co-actors she says: "These are the mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See their faces -- how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires" (74). She then admits that she was in love with her maternal uncle because it was he who first associated with her closely in her strict house and admired her blooming youth. It was he who gave her love and "a whole meaning to life" (74). She was hardly fourteen and she did not know at that time whether it was a sin to be physically very close with one's maternal uncle. When she expressed her desire to him for a marriage so that she could live her "beautiful lovely dream openly" (74) he as a hypocrite "turned tail and ran" (74). She "felt like smashing his face in public and spitting on it" (74).

Feeling cheated and betrayed, she tried to commit suicide by jumping off the roof of her house. But she did not die. Since she felt her feelings and biological urges were fully alive in her body she again fell in love. But this time as a grown up woman and "her love was for an unusual intellect" (74). She confesses: "It isn't love at all -- it's worship! But it was the same mistake. I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering -- and went his way" (75). She pathetically states: "He didn't want my mind, or

devotion -- he didn't care about them! ... He wasn't a god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! That's all!" (75). Unable to bear the excruciating and bitter experience of her frustrated love, Benare feels weak, writhes in pain and mental agony and finally screams. Yet no one feels pity for her. They simply watch the whole scene with indifference. She then tells the judge that she wants to live for the sake of the "tender little bud -- of what will be a lisping, laughing, dancing little life -- my son -- my whole existence!" (75). She is very firm that she wants her body now for her son and "he must have a mother ... a father to call his own -- a house -- to be looked after -- he must have a good name!"(75).

Thus she reveals her agonized self, her intense feeling of love and gusto for life which resulted unfortunately in pregnancy. Because of her natural thirst for love and sexual desires she happened to defy the patriarchal values, cultural and moral restrictions and the institution of marriage. Without any pretention she openly admits her moral weakness and tragic dilemma courageously. While commenting on Benare's long speech in the mock-trial, Arundhati Banerjee observes:

Leela Benare's defence of herself against the onslaughts of the upholders of social norms in a long soliloquy. has become famous in the history of contemporary Marathi theatre... In fact, during the court proceedings, on several occasions, her objections and protestations are drowned by the judge's cry of "Silence!" and the banging of the gravel. Benare's monologue... is more a self-justification than an attack on society's hypocrisies. It is poignant, sensitive and highlights the vulnerability of women in our society (ix).

Though the members of the mock-court have, in fact, derived a lot of vicious and sadistic pleasure by forcing Benare to disclose her private sexual life, they are, no doubt, stupefied by her true and honest confession of the intimate secrets of her life. Finally Kashikar, the judge, gives the verdict. He tells Benare that the crimes committed by her are most terrible. He states: "Marriage is the very foundation of our society's stability. Motherhood must be sacred and pure." (*Silence!* 76). He continues: "No memento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore, this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed" (76). The judge passes his judgement without giving a chance for cross-examination by the defence-lawyer and this violates the basic norms of the court. Moreover, the "judgement is based on half-truths and fictitious stories presented by the character-assassins and scandal-mongers" (E. Renuka 55).

On hearing the inhuman, heartless, merciless and cold-blooded verdict of the judge, Benare writhes in unbearable pain and screams: "No! No! No! -- I won't let you do it -- I won't let it happen -- I won't let it happen!" (*Silence!* 76). Terribly upset with the "paroxysms of torment" (76), Benare collapses on the nearby table. She is found motionless and only "stifled sobs" are heard when others are "as still as statues" (76). At this time someone from outside opens the door and asks whether the play has already started. Samant answers him by saying that the play is yet to begin. Meanwhile others try to convince her that it was after all a mock-trial and only a game. Unable to wake her up from her inert position, Samant places the

green cloth parrot in front of her and goes away. At the end of the play Benare's voice is heard singing a song softly.

The play thus reveals the moral hypocrisy, the sadistic tendencies, the hostility and the verbal violence of the male-dominated society against women. As a sensitive and committed writer, Tendulkar perceives the harsh realities of contemporary society and depicts them artistically without preconceived notions. By using the technique of a 'play – within – the play' the playwright portrays the conflict between Benare and the middle-class patriarchal society effectively.

Benare who is known for her uncompromising spirit of independence and natural gusto for life has been inhumanly treated as an accused in the chauvinistic court of law. She has to undergo agonizing torture and psychological trauma for challenging the scornful and cynical social norms and mode of behaviour. She has become a desperate victim of society because she tries to live independently and enjoy life as much as possible. As an emancipated woman of modern India, she has been in search of the true meaning of life. Because of her motherly instinct and her care and anxiety for the well-being of her child in the womb, she goes to the extent of begging the undeserving men to marry her and father her child.

While she is held responsible for unwedded motherhood which is considered to be a serious act of social trespass, Professor Damle, who undermines Benare's honour and self-respect by making her pregnant, is allowed to go scot-free. Neither the so-called society-conscious man Mr. Kashikar nor the other members of the troupe find fault with Professor Damle who, despite having a wife and five children, has willfully acted against the sacred institution of marriage by indulging in an extramarital affair.

A judicial court is expected to uphold dignity and decorum and render justice with disinterestedness. It has to redress the grievances of the affected people based on proper investigation and examination. But unfortunately Benare is held guilty in the trial on the basis of the fabricated evidences given by the witnesses. The judge does not take efforts to probe whether what the witnesses have said in the court is true or not. Obviously the hardcore male-chauvinistic prejudice has turned the judicial system into a mechanism to suppress the voice of women in society. Instead of examining the charge levelled against Benare objectively, the judge views the case with the jaundiced outlook of bourgeois mentality. The very judicial system which is supposed to guard the vulnerable and the weak has eventually turned out to be a repressive and dehumanized system. Since the people, who involve themselves in the process of justice, lack compassion, kindness and fellow-feeling the justice rendered by them fails drastically to protect human dignity and values. Though Benare has been tried in the mock-court for the mock-charge of infanticide she is finally compelled by the court to commit the real crime of infanticide. Quite ironically the charge which has been framed against Benare at the beginning of the trial has turned out to be the real verdict at the end of the play.

As a keen observer of life Tendulkar presents the changing reality of contemporary society authentically and honestly in the play. His real and genuine concern for the oppressed

and his awareness of social evils has originated from his true understanding of society. He does not certainly approve of the waywardness of Benare but he tends to sympathize with her.

Tendulkar does not offer any solution to the problem but leaves it to the discretion of the readers. The treatment of the theme, characterization and the structure of the play reveal his artistic excellence.

The play is widely appreciated for its technical experiments, textual compactness, sharp dialogue, skilful art of characterization and brilliant plot construction. The use of irony and satire and the symbols such as the green cloth parrot and the locked door certainly enhance the dramatic effect. Moreover, the excellent combinations in the dramatic narrative of the tragic and comic episodes such as using the English dictionary for a holy book in the process of taking oath, spitting contest and ear picking during the court proceedings show the real artistry and creative skill of the playwright. The very title of the play indicates the silence imposed on women in Indian society. On the whole, Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* has become an artistic and creative treasure in the realm of Indian Drama in English.

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"While thought exists,
words are alive and literature becomes an escape,
not from, but into living."

■ Cyril Connolly
