

## Impact of the Subaltern in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session!* A study

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### Abstract

The question of subalternity emerges in relation to subordinate social groups and individuals whose historical activity is repressed, neglected, misinterpreted or 'at the margins' of hegemonic histories, discourses and social formations. Women in India are considered as the subordinate to men as they are not equal with man in any sphere of life. The protagonist of this play Miss Leela Benare is presented as an extraordinary and crucial character. Benare is an unconventional schoolteacher who is not shy about expressing her opinions and lives life just a little off the beaten path. She is chosen to play a woman on trial for infanticide in a mock trial that takes a dark turn toward the serious. While she mocks the whole thing at first, we see her grow tenser, more frightened, and more burdened as the trial goes on. She tries to escape it numerous times but can never manage to do so, and she sits to hear judgment passed upon how she chooses to live her life.

Vijay Tendulkar is one of India's most influential and renowned playwrights of the 20th century, particularly in the Marathi language. The play's Marathi title is "Shantana! Court Chalu Aahe" has been translated by himself in English language entitled *Silence! The Court is in Session*. It is the story of mock rehearsal of a court room where things getting changed and heroine is charged for illicit pregnancy. Tendulkar has portrayed all his characters very effectively in the play; he has represented Indian middle class society and position of women in it.

The aim of this paper is to throw light by applying the post-colonial critical theory of subaltern and understand the side of Banare. In the scene-III only she broke her silence and proves herself not guilty.

**Key Words:** - Woman, subaltern, Patriarchy, Court, Banare

The word 'Subaltern' stands for 'of inferior rank' or status. Subordinate, hence, of rank, power, authority and action. In other words, it refers to the subordination of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. It also indicates to those groups in society who are subject to the domination of the ruling classes. In general, subaltern classes include peasants, workers and other groups who have been denied access to 'hegemonic' power.

The theory of Subaltern emerges by Antonio Gramsci the Italian Marxist, best known for his elaboration of the concept of 'hegemony'. A founder of the Italian communist party (in 1921), he was imprisoned by the Fascists in 1926, and spent the remainder of his life under arrest. While in prison, and despite poor health, he continued to study and write. *The Prison Notebooks* (1929— 1935), published only after the fall of Fascism, represent the core of his considerable contribution to Marxist theory. (Edgar, Sedgwick, 2002) subaltern, meaning "of inferior rank", is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those working class people in Soviet Union who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other group denied access to hegemonic power.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an Indian scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic. She is a University Professor at Columbia University. She is the co- founder of Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. She is considered as one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals. The concept of the "subaltern" gained increased prominence and currency with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak. 1988). According to Spivak, the subaltern cannot speak. She opines that the subaltern does not have a voice. It was a commentary on the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, questioning and exposing their patronizing attitude. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish. This is however not to say that physical act of speaking is impossible from within the subaltern position. Post-Colonial literature persistently generated an enormous literature, especially by literary critics, feminists, art of critics, social reformists, political scientists and political economists.

Subaltern Studies initiated its remarkable work in England from the end of 1970s, during discussions on subaltern themes among a small group of English and Indian historians led to a plan to launch a new journal in India. Oxford University Press in New Delhi agreed to publish three volumes of essays titled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* from 1982 edited by Ranajit Guha. The first and foremost leader of this literary movement was Ranajit Guha who had written on peasant uprisings in India. Much of the collective's early work dealt with the politics of peasants who had been involved in the mass movements that ultimately led to India's independence. The members of the subaltern studies group were Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyanendra Pandey.

Gramsci's idea of subalternity expands the Marxist categories of 'proletariat' and 'underclasses', focusing on the aspects of cultural subordination that are intertwined with economic oppression. Generally speaking, "he refers to slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, the popolani (common people) and popolo (people) of the medieval

communes, the proletariat, and the bourgeoisie prior to the [Italian] Risorgimento as subaltern groups. [...] Gramsci [...] conceives subalternity as an intersectionality of the variations of race, class, gender, culture, religion, nationalism, and colonialism functioning within an ensemble of socio-political and economic relations” (*Green*, p. 387).

Subaltern studies is a broadly influential academic movement whose goal is to refocus history on the unique role of subaltern or marginalized people in bringing about large scale transformations in society. The central objective was to retake history for the under classes, whose voices had not been heard earlier. They were highlighting on subaltern in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture.

In Subaltern Studies, a history written from a subaltern perspective must thereby focus on the politics and the culture of subaltern groups understood as autonomous domains. These interact and overlap with the politics and culture of the ruling/elite groups; although they are neither completely separated, nor fully integrated with them (*Guha*, p.7).

In this way, subalternity has a dual character in Subaltern Studies. “Firstly, when looking for the autonomous subaltern traces in the post-colonial archive, Subaltern Studies approaches subalternity as a sociological object of historiographical enquiry. Secondly, subalternity becomes a perspective of observation” (*Veena*, p.310) that redresses the exclusion of subaltern groups from historiographical accounts. As such, the use of subalternity in Subaltern Studies is not only socio-historical, but also epistemic/epistemological. Subalternity describes a position that is excluded from the hegemonic domain and that is deployed as a meta-theoretical tool to criticize and renovate historiography.

Subalternity as a form turns into an umbrella concept which increases the scope of research from various subaltern perspectives. People existing at present would readily like to inhabit the situation of a subaltern whose silence is perhaps voiced through the advocating demonstration of an intellectual. However, Spivak warns in advance from such a situation of accommodating the condition of an enduring subordination. Subaltern Studies became a unique place for a new kind of history from below, a people’s history free of national constrictions, a post nationalist re-imagining of the Indian nation on the underside, at the margins, outside nationalism. Subaltern Studies also became entangled with efforts to re-imagine history itself. It re-invented subalternity.

Vijay Tendulkar is one of the famous Indian playwrights. He has strongly expressed the socio-political conditions in his plays. He appeared as a revolt against the traditional values of a primarily orthodox society with the production of *Silence! The Court is in Session* in 1967. The play was initially written in Marathi language and later translated into English. Tendulkar has represented the dilemma of a young woman who is betrayed by the male-dominated society. A traditional male dominated society cannot surrender its paralysed traditions and customs. The society resists the change to come. It is a sour satire against the social ills and an attempt to condemn the follies that exist in our society.

The play tells the story of a group of people who are planning on staging a play in a small village. When one of the actors in the cast does not turn up for rehearsal, a local man steps into

the role; in order for him to understand how the court procedures that they will be using in the play actually work so he can bring authenticity to the role, they decide to stage a mock trial. Unfortunately, this unearths some secrets that some of the other cast members would rather have never revealed.

The play was first performed in 1967; *Silence* was largely well-received and Tendulkar was awarded the Karmaladevi Chattopadhyah Prize for Drama in 1970. He was also given the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for his services to playwriting that same year. The play is one of India's most performed, with over 6000 stagings to date.

In 1971, the play was adapted for the big screen in India and is still considered one of the greatest Indian films ever made. Tendulkar was invited to write the screenplay based on his original script; it was his first time adapting his work for the movies, but it was a monumental success, and he went on to write five more films that are considered to be amongst the top one hundred Indian movies ever made.

Down the ages women have been treated as a mere plaything in the hands of the patriarchal society: sometimes it is the father, sometimes the lover or husband and sometimes her own son. They are treated as subaltern in the family. Women become the objects of pleasure to the masculine gender, an instrument of their bodily satisfaction. There are innumerable unwritten social rules and regulations for women; their lives have been clogged by doctrines and dogmas. Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is in Session* (henceforth referred as *Silence!*) is such a play which portrays the protagonist, Leela Benare's unspeakable miserable plight and the façade of sympathy behind which there lies scratches of mental and spiritual violence- this cannot be seen but can be felt from within. She is a young middle class woman of 34 years who is working as a teacher to earn her livelihood. She is loved and appreciated by her students in the school. She loves life and is full of spirits as she says "My life is my own...I'll do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide". (*Silence*, pp.4-5) She is very proud of her performance as a teacher and feels that her life is her own and no one has got the right to interfere in it. Her first song "Oh, I have got a sweet heart" also shows her loving nature- she wants a loving and caring lover. She says to Sukhatme, "We should laugh, we should play, we should sing. If we can and if they'll let us, we should dance too!" (*Silence*, p.23) She is happy to take part in a play concerning the trial of President Johnson for manufacturing atomic weapons. But she is comatose that the mock trial they propose to perform will be her real trial. Yet there are latent hints of She is a member of an amateur dramatic association which stages plays indifferent places to create public consciousness on some social or sociological issues.

In the play except Banare all the other characters are suffering from cruelty and inferiority complex. Sukhatme is a failure lawyer, Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar has no issues, they are childless. Ponshe is an interfiled scientist. Thus as Karnik is concerned, he is failed actor. The same is the case with Rokde, who failed to achieve an independent life. In other words we can say that these characters have no individuality of their own. In play readers can feel these characters are jealous to Banare and as they get chance to blame her they converted mock trial into blaming and treated her as the criminal of society because she is not married yet and pregnant too.

As they decide for mock trial first Mrs. Kashikar wants to be in victim box but her husband denies and finally they agree that it ought to be Benare, and Mrs. Kashikar says it will be interesting to see the trial of a woman. Sukhatme muses that “when there’s a woman on the dock, the case does have a different complexion...That is my experience” (*Silence*, p.38). They also think the case should be a charge of social significance, and they begin whispering together. Actually they are having doubts regarding Banare and find it the best way to find out the truth. This is a kind of conspiracy against the successful any happy woman who love and enjoy her life as a single woman. They asked Rodke to organize the room for the court. Most go into the wings and then wait for Benare. Meantime she comes out singing and looking refreshed. Ponkshe approaches her and announces she has been arrested on suspicion of a very serious crime and is brought before the bar of the court. Benare is shocked after listening this and watching the others fills their positions. Kashikar sits as the judge, Sukhatme puts on his black lawyer’s gown. Kashikar says solemnly that she is accused of the crime of infanticide, and asks if she is guilty of it.

As trial starts Sukhatme dramatically withdraws his question about her age, and Kashikar grumbles that society should revive the custom of child marriage and “Marry off the girls before they attain puberty. All this promiscuity will come to an end”. (*Silence*, p.66) Sukhatme wanders behind Benare, who jumps when she hears his voice. He asks how she has managed to stay unmarried at such a “mature” and “advanced” age (*Silence*, p.67), as well as how she missed her chances at marriage. At her continued silence, Sukhatme says he closes the examination for now. Sukhatme raises the personal questions to her and making comment about her marriage. Sukhatme calls Mrs. Kashikar, who is eager to take the box. Sukhatme asks how such an educated and well-brought-up girl—Mrs. Kashikar corrects him and says ‘woman’—is unmarried. Mrs. Kashikar states that anyone who wants to get married can do so in a flash, but some women today do not care about responsibility. They only want comfort, and the fact that women work today means they do not need to marry. This is why society is flawed: all the promiscuity and women getting “everything” without marrying. Sukhatme presses her on what she means by this; she implies sex but does not say it. Sukhatme asks if he knows the accused; Kashikar replies that he does and that these adult unmarried girls are “a sinful canker on the body of society” (*Silence*, p.82)

Sukhatme explains how the charge here is dreadful, and Miss Leela Benare “made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood” (*Silence*, p. 84). Her character is disgusting, devoid of morality, and her conduct has “blackened all social and moral values” (*Silence*, p.85). She is “public enemy number one” (*Silence*, p.85) and if behavior like hers is allowed, it will mean the ruin of the country. Unmarried motherhood is an even more serious crime than infanticide, and if she brings up her child he fears “the very existence of society will be in danger” (*Silence*, p. 85). All moral values and traditions will crumble away, for the accused has dynamited them. Woman “bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society” (*Silence*, p. 85) and Benare is thus not fit for independence. He urges the judge to bestow the severest punishment upon the accused.

As the play progresses, other actors are continuously blaming her till scene III. Even in the final verdict Benare is equated with criminals and sinners’ and the court orders that she should live but the child in her womb should be destroyed. Sometimes she is called Mrs. Damle

instead of Miss Banare. For her condition only she is responsible but what about Damle?? He is married man with children and deceived Banare as false promises. Especially in Indian male-dominated society women are treated like this only. No one blames man but all use to blame only woman. Women are considered as low rank/ subordinate and weak creature in front of male; Damle even was not presented in the trial and no one asks him there.

Banare breaks down during the mock trial because the story of the character in the play she is performing at the mock trial is identical to her own. The last speech of Ms. Benare is skillfully constructed by Tendulkar. It echoes the irony, sorrow and lampoon present in Indian society. Ms. Benare said: But I was ignorant Instead; I threw myself off a parapet of our house-to embrace death. But I didn't die. My body didn't die. I felt as if feelings were dead-but they had not died either then... (*Silence*, p. 74)

Sukhatme further clarifies his point "Infanticide is a dreadful act, but bunging an illegitimate child is horrifying. If it is encouraged, there will no such thing as the institution of marriage. Immorality will flourish. Before, our eyes, our beautiful dream of a society, governed by tradition will crumble into dust." (*Silence*, p.70). It is through his characters that Vijay Tendulkar expresses his deep concern about motherhood, morality, society, traditions and our religion. The judge Mr. Kashikar defends social customs while giving judgment on Miss Benare's case "Prisoner Miss Benare, pay the closest attention. The crimes you have committed are most terrible. There is no forgiveness for them; your sin must be expiated. Irresponsibility must be claimed down." (*Silence*, p.75). The judge expresses his views on motherhood; "Motherhood must be sacred and pure. This court takes a serious view of your attempt to dynamite all this...The morality, which you have shown through your conduct, is the morality you are planning to impart to the youth of tomorrow." (*Silence*, 75-76). Social customs are of utmost importance and "marriage is the very foundation of our society's stability. Criminals and sinners should know their place; tomorrow's society will be deleteriously impacted by her behavior. He rules that 'she shall live but the child in her womb will be destroyed'. After listens these unlawful comments she becomes astonished. She is speechless and bears the comments. Benare stands tall in her all utter psychological harassments given by them. According to P. Obula Reddy and P. Pramila Devi, Benare, "the principal character in the play is as sprightly, rebellious and assertive as the heroine of Shakespeare romantic comedies - of course. Benare is lovely spark from the thunder bolt of Tendulkar. She gathers herself as a new woman pleads for freedom from the social norms". (Reddy and Devi 36) and says:-

"Yes, I have a lot to say" (*Silence*, p. 72). Then follows a long monologue in which Benare expresses her zest for life and tells how she is deprived of her wishes: BENARE. [...] My life was a burden to me. [Heaving a great sigh] But when you can't lose it, you realize the value of it. [...] There's great joy in a suicide that's failed. It's greater even than the pain of living. [...] I swallowed that poison, but didn't even let a drop of it touch them! [...] I cried inside, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair, and I taught them hope". (*Silence*, p. 72-73)

Then she crumbles and admits that she committed the sin of being in love with her mother's brother. He was the only one who loved her and was close to her. She was barely fourteen and knew nothing. She wanted to marry him so she could live her dream openly, but all were against it and the uncle fled. She threw herself off their house in her rage and despair, but

she did not die. Then, as a grown woman she fell in love again and offered her body up, but “my intellectual god took the offering—and went his way. He didn’t want my mind, or my devotion...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!...This body is a traitor!” (*Silence*, p. 88.) She claims she hates her body, writhing in torment, and then realizes it is all she has in the end. Now this body carries a “tender little bud” (*Silence*, p.89), and it will be her whole existence. This son must have a mother, a father, and a good name.

Benare hurls her denigrating attack against patriarchy in this monologue: BENARE. [...] “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”. (*Silence*, p. 74)

The judge pronounce his final judgment thus, "Neither you nor anyone else should ever do anything like this again. No moments 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." (*Silence*, p.76). Although Miss Leela Benare says that society has no right to interfere with her private right liberties but in spite of that she cannot totally shy away from her responsibility. "Na jieven Jeevanmarhati 'Life is no worthy of life Hold an enquiry against life. Sack it from its job, but why? Why? Was I slack in my work? I just put my whole life into working with children." (*Silence*, p. 73). Vijay Tendulkar has developed the central character of Miss Benare through the contents of a beautiful poem by Mrs. Shirish Pai. Miss Benare is very frank in giving a fitting reply to the charges leveled against her in the court. She tells the judge that life is a very dreadful thing and life must be hanged.

Justice is not done with Banare due to male dominated society and one of the most conspicuous reasons that Damle is not only absent from the proceedings but is also never blamed in the slightest for the situation with Benare. Sharmila Jajodia writes, "Thus evidence after evidence is piled up against Benare to prove her guilty. But Damle, who has also his share of guilt in the situation, is not even held an accused at all and left scot-free." (*Jajodiya*, p. 15) This is clearly extremely hypocritical. Agreeing with Jajodia, Arka Pramanick notes that “The frustrated male members of the society try to subjugate women to prove their power and superiority in the social hierarchy. They praise motherhood with bombastic phrases but try to destroy Benare's infant in the womb. Benare is stigmatized and sacked from her job. But Prof. Damle, the man responsible for her condition, escapes scot-free for he is a male.”(*Sharmila*, p. 139)

In the play not only male characters but one female Mrs. Kashikar has negative views against Banare and does not hesitate to say that this young unmarried girl gets everything without marrying. She demonstrates her doubt, how can Benare stay without marriage at the age of thirty-four? It is interesting that Mrs. Kashikar reflects here a traditional housewife who has no concern with the progressive and contemporary attitude of a young girl in the modern societal. According to her, her whole life is the family in which she is brought up and for which happiness she had to go ahead a future life. But consequently, Benare stands for a progressive and educated life. She wants to emerge out of the command of a patriarchal supremacy.

Tendulkar in his creation ‘Silence! The court is in session’ chooses a term of the legal register as the title of his play to make an influential command on society with a weighty patriarchal bias that makes justice unfeasible. A court is supposed to be a seat of justice, significance and respectability. All through this play, he also makes an assessment of the today’s court procedures, and finds out the problem of the ruinness of the court. The role of the judge in this play is itself – ironic a judge is normally free from prejudice and unusual uttering. But here the case is just otherwise. The judgement itself seems more ridiculous. Mr. Kashikar says to Banare : “The crime you have committed are most dreadful. There is no pardon for them ... no momento of your offense should remain for next generations. Hence this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be smashed.”(*Silence*, p.)

The attitude of the Indian society towards women is somewhat paradoxical. A typical Indian male, traditionally, does not recognize women as their equal and therefore exploit them. But we have many goddesses in our religion whom we worship as mothers. This ambiguousness has always structured men’s response to the problem of women. Patriarchy in India is never liberal towards women and treats female sexuality as a potentially destabilizing force. Men do not recognize the freedom of women; they propagate the ‘sati-savitri’ image to tame the ambitious women for the benefit of their own. The traditional picture of women in literature is that of a domesticated commodity. Her sanctioned role by the patriarchal society is that of an ideal daughter, wife and mother.

Miss Banare is sensitively harassed but still starves to search for her survival. She has an immense tolerance to endure. She is the picture of blamelessness and sympathy. However she is offended at every stage, she has not done harm to anyone. If she did harm to anyone, it is her own self. The difficulty and plunder of a weak woman has been best articulated in the play. He has always been controversial because he has always been contemporary in his concerns, social, political and theatrical. All his plays deal with the domination of the weak by the powerful. He treats his female characters with understanding and compassion. Silence! The court is in session’, is a naturalistic play and true representation of subalternity of woman as the weak creature.

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