

## Individual Versus Society: A Study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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**ABSTRACT:** Literature, especially the writings which come under the scope of social realism, has always been taking inspiration from the society in which it originates or in the space where its originator (writer) lives. In other words, literature reflects the society. To use the most hackneyed phrase (but still it has amazing vitality in it) about literature and society: *literature is the mirror of the society*. The fact cannot be denied that literature bears the imprints of the changes within a particular society occur over the course of history. The writings of Vijay Tendulkar, specifically his plays, are also no exception to it. His plays analyze human experience (mostly painful) in the circumstances created by social and political powers. His leftist views, more or less against the fanatic Hindu political and religious groups, find voice in his literary works. He exposes hegemonic control over Indian masses at socio-political levels by the orthodox politically-backed people [mis]guiding people's emotion in an aggressive way towards ethnic and religious minorities. During his lifetime, he simultaneously received wide public acclaim and high censure for asserting his radical views about society, religion, orthodoxy etc. which traps humans in modern insensitive era. For his plays, such as *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Kamala*, *The Vultures* etc., Tendulkar gets inspiration from real-life incidents and social upheavals. His writings, undoubtedly, have significantly contributed in the transformation of the modern literary landscape of India. His *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a seminal play which takes up many burning issues related to the society. Their pertinence has enough capacity to survive contemporary hostile reactions and the tests of the time in future.

**Keywords:** Society, literature, insensitive, writings, political, view, orthodox, radical, voice, experience, classic, private, life.

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) one of the leading luminaries of Indian drama, was a versatile writer. Although he is best known for his plays, he contributed in the areas of cinema and television (as a screenplay writer), literary criticism, political journalism and social commentary (primarily in Marathi). He has more than fifty plays to his credit. Many of his plays are counted among the classics of Marathi theatre, and have been translated into many Indian languages. For successfully raising social issues through his writing, he garnered numerous prestigious awards including the National Film Award for best screenplay for Shyam Benegal's *Manthan* (1976), the Vishnudas Bhave memorial Award, the Katha Chudamani Award, and the Padma Bhushan, the third-highest civilian award of Indian. Regarding his literary oeuvre, Vinita Bhatnagar avers that his writing focuses on "the reworking of historical past of Maharashtra and the use of Maharashtrian theatrical forms" (148).

Vijay Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session* [henceforth *Silence!*] was originally written in Marathi in 1967 under the title *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe!* A German short-story by Friedrich Durrenmatt (1921-1990), "Die Panne," (1956) inspired Tendulkar to write this play. The short-story presents Durrenmatt's idea that certain human experiences always enables others to connect to the shared universality of human experience. Tendulkar restructured the story to fit it into the Indian society. He relocates the narrative in the India of 1950s. Through the play, he documents the lives, mores and perspectives of men and women in this period. Primarily, the play draws upon situations that were typical of people in the recently independent Indian society, rapidly undergoing unprecedented changes. The society sought to incorporate modern ideas while trying to break free of suffocating older constricting patterns and norms.

*Silence!* is a play in three acts dealing with the lives of ten characters, mostly from urban middle-class, coming from a similar background and with diverse experiences of life. They are members of "The Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association" (Tendulkar 59), a socially committed group that performs plays based on important issues affecting the society around them or the world in general. For a particular evening, the "miniscule cross-section of middle-class society" (Banerjee vii) of SMPTA group come to a village to enact a "Mock/Living

Lawcourt” (Tendulkar 59), a mock trial protesting against President Johnson’s production of atomic weapons.

Therefore, in the name of a courtroom drama, the playwright strategically borrows from an institution available for the resolution of civilian problems in the modern world. The judiciary system is meant to enshrine the highest secular and objective principles. The rights of the individual depend on several courts, smaller and larger in scale, supposed to deliver justice without any prejudice or unfairness. In the-play-within-play or mock trial, the motley group of characters uses the possibility of a tacitly open discussion forum. The small social community involved in this fake trial cannot escape the trial as their work situation glues them together. N.S. Dharan rightly comments that the play is Tendulkar’s attempt “to highlight the hypocrisy latent in this microscopic cross-section of the milieu of the metropolitan Bombay middle-class” (50).

As there is time in performance, actors decide to utilize their time in rehearsing their play in order to teach acting to Raghu Samant, a local and extempore entrant in the play because of the absence of an actor. In a very suspenseful manner, the rehearsal turns out to be a nasty and real attack on Leela Benare’s (the central character’s) personal life, about her affair with already married Prof. Damle (the symbolically absent actor) and subsequent unwanted pregnancy.

The character of Benare is pivotal to the narrative as far as the theme of individual versus society is concerned. Her character not only provides her insightful ironic perception that introduces other characters but also gives the narrative to develop smoothly. Whatever she tells about her colleagues turns out to be an objection appreciation of them as their action and dialogues reveal their true identity. All the phony characters she introduces in the first act, she faces all of them in the rest of the two acts. The ceremonious Mr. Kashikar, docile Mrs. Kashikar, Calibanesque Balu Rokde, vainglorious lawyer Sukhatme and inter-failed Ponshe team up in a way that symbolizes their functioning as that of society against the individual, represented in the character of Benare.

Leela Benare finds herself swallowed up by the imposition of norms and dictates of an authoritative, unsympathetic and unhelpful society, headed by hypocritical, nonchalant and

morally frail people. The titular ‘silence’ seeks to mum the sensible and reasonable human voices related to the likes of Benare. *Silence!* represents a spectacular social criticism and the tragedy, in which an individual is victimized by the insensitive social forces. Sexually abused, frequently abandoned, mercilessly targeted at workplace, stalked in personal life; when Benare finds herself as the prime accused in the court of life, she bursts out:

Life is like this. Life is so and so. Life is such and such. 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 something that’s nothing—or a nothing that’s something. [*Suddenly striking a courtroom attitude.*] Milord, life is a very dreadful thing. Life must be hanged. *Na jeevan jeevanamarhati*. ‘Life is not worthy of life’. Hold on enquiry against life. Sack it from its job! But why? Why?... (Tendulkar 116)

In our society, there are behavioral codes for everyone, especially strict and more regulated codes for women. These codes remain latent until something anomalous happens in the society. Most of these anomalies are related to Freudian discarded desires handed over to the unconscious. These repressed desires, in most cases, are related to sexual dissatisfaction or non-fulfillment. Primarily, the dictates pushing sexual desire to back foot are directed towards females, no matter to what category they belong to—young girls, married and unmarried women, widows, old women.

Several characters justify their insensitivity and offensiveness in the name of game or activities just for-the-sake-of-fun. No perfect example of Freudian slips can be found in the Indian literature elsewhere. The characters reveal their true self thinking that they are just showing the possibility of finding wrong in them or the fictionalized version of their evil. All the while, they unknowingly dissect their own identity in front of the audience. They pretend to be light-hearted; while, in reality, they scathingly remark about the personal choices Benare made over the course of her life.

The stereotyped prevalent in the contemporary society highlighted in the play are as pertinent in the twenty-first century as they were in twentieth century. *Pink* (2016), a popular film starring

Amitabh Bachchan, Tapsi Pannu and others exemplifies this clearly. Both the play and the movie depict how we deduce from certain biases based on slight hunches of outward signs that what should be morally acceptable or unacceptable. The main three female protagonists in the film and Benare in the play are judged by their talking and meeting to men, financial independence and certain other ‘free ways’ of behavior in the society. In the context of Tendulkar’s plays, Shailja B. Wadikar opines:

Each of them [Tendulkar’s plays] reflects contemporary Indian society, its problems, and its challenges. . . . These plays give the audience a new awareness of truth which is difficult to encounter. In the playwright’s deft handling of the complex and varied issues, one can clearly notice his keen observation of life. All the major aspects of life—psychological, socio-political, deterministic, existential, feminist [sic.] and humanization—are delineated in a realistic manner. The approach of the playwright in the depiction of the problematic nature of Indian society is revolutionary one. (x)

All in all, the ability of Tendulkar to make the literature reflect what society really is brings him up together with other legends of post-Independence Indian theatre such as Girish Karnard (Kannad), Rakesh Mohan (Hindi) and Badal Sircar (Bengali).

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