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SILENCE!—THE VIOLENCE OF MIDDLE CLASS

It is generally hailed that the theme of 'raw' violence is rampant in Tendulkar's plays. But Silence! the Court is in Session is an exception. It is considered as Tendulkar's best play. It deals with the issue of social morality and shows how a young and attractive woman school teacher is trapped and coerced into making a confession about her illicit love-affair. Sumit Mitra seems to have voiced the general critical opinion when he said that "the raw brutality and lewdness of 'Gidhade' (vultures) make a triumphal return in the post-Shantata! (post-Silence) phase, particularly in ... Sakharam Binder".¹ This appears to us more of a comment on Silence, than the other two plays. It is evident here that Silence is "free from the naturalistic theme of violence, unlike Vultures and Sakharam".²

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Benare the principal character in the play is as sprightly as rebellious and as assertive as the heroines of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. She frightens away the other characters when they enter the village hall. She mocks at Ponkshe and she laughs at Rokde. Even though she is "the soul of seriousness" she never goes around "with a long face". Even the innocent Samant compliments her: "Miss Benare is really amazing", "this lady behaved in a most exemplary manner", "She's a very nice lady". She has been a punctual teacher. She has never given "a bit of room for disapproval - I don't give an inch of it to any one".* Her class is scared of her, still it adores her. She would spend "the last drop" of her blood teaching them. That is why the other teachers and even the principal is jealous of her. She is a keen observer. She can see how Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar have sheltered Rokde in order to escape from boredom and have made "a slave" of him. She is rebellious too. She likes to mother her illegitimate child.

* Arundhati Banerjee, "Silence! the Court is in Session", *Vijay Tendulkar: Five Plays* (Bombay: OUP, 1992), p.57. All further textual references are from this publication.
With all her liveliness and efficiency she becomes a butt of ridicule, "just because of one bit of slander". It is here that the middle class morality exploits her. A group of teachers, among whom she is also a member, plan to stage a play in a village. As one of them has not turned up a local man is asked to replace him. A rehearsal is arranged and a mock-trial is staged to make him understand the court procedure. Ironically enough it is Miss Benare who suggests that a different play other than the atomic weapons trial should be played for the purpose. When she goes to bathroom, that is in her absence, all the men conspire together against her and a mock charge of infanticide is levelled against her as it is "a charge with social significance". She looks stunned when Kashikar announces that she is accused of infanticide. She pleads innocence: "I couldn't even kill a common cockroach. How could I kill a new-born child?" (p.79) This falls deaf on the ears of the men "Vultures".

Karnik claims "The crime itself is imaginary". But immediately Ponkshe expresses the contrary: "only the accused is real". It is rightly said that
We never know when the reality and fiction lapse into each other, heightening the mock-seriousness of the serious and the seriousness of the mock-serious; and thus heightening the absurdity of Benare's condition in the play.\(^3\)

The men in the play overwhelm her with a shower of evidence on her. Ponkshe makes stark comments: "To the public eye she is unmarried" and "She runs after men too much". When questioned by Sukhatme the mock-prosecutioner, Mr. Karnik, in real life an actor, raises the trial to a realm of reality by revealing the truth that Rokde has seen "the accused in a compromising situation". Rokde, a very timid young man with a lack of nerve even to stand in the witness box, gets enough encouragement from the other characters, Mrs. Kashikar, Mr. Kashikar and Sukhatme. And Benare herself, like Susan in Hardy's _Mayor of Caster bridge_ brings a catastrophe over herself by warning Henchand at the wrong moment that selling of a wife is no longer "a joke", brings a doom on herself by ceaselessly laughing at Rokde. Rokde summons up courage and makes a devastating statement that he has seen Benare in Prof. Damle's room

in the college hostel. Once Prof. Damle's name is brought to light, it is no longer a mock-trial but a real trial and it is here that the mock-seriousness merges with the serious. Even though he enjoys at heart, Kashikar feels uneasy about it and says that they are "getting on to too personal level". And Benare's protestations not to drag her private life into public stands in vain. Mrs. Kashikar, who is the only other woman character in the play, also insists on continuing the trial.

It is finally Samant, the innocent villager, who unwittingly thrusts a stab into Benare's heart. He is the only man character in the play who has nothing against Benare. Just to play his part in the mock-trial he continues the evidence by giving vent to his imagination basing on a novel that he has been reading. He goes on saying when he went to meet Prof. Damle in his house he found the door locked from inside and heard an argument between the lady and the Professor. The lady was pleading with the latter not to abandon her, if he did he would be guilty of "murdering two" and the latter replied that he is helpless because he has to safeguard his reputation.
Benare loses control over herself and violently asks them to stop it. But Mrs. Kashikar tries to appease her by questioning her why she is flying into such a violent rage as her conscience is clear. Now for Benare it is crystal-clear that all of them have plotted against her and she cries, "you've all deliberately ganged up on me." (p.93) with these heart-rendering words she tries to run away from the hall. But when she tries to unbolt the door she finds it locked from outside, "irretrievably trapping her in her immediate environment".  

Mrs. Kashikar takes her back to the witness-box like an executioner leads a "trapped animal" to the altar of sacrifice. Now the trial goes on to its inevitable end. All of them become revengeful and expose her private life. They discuss her age. They wonder how she remained unmarried till 34. Kashikar makes a sweeping generalization that the girls should be married off before puberty. Benare herself is demanded by Sukhatme to tell the court how she has come to stay unmarried to such an advanced age. Mrs. Kashikar makes another damaging

4. Ibid., p.36.
remark: "That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying". (p.99) She wonders, "why must she have Prof. Damle, and Damle alone, to see her home after a performance?" (p.100) for Benare is always asking Prof. Damle to accompany her after a performance is over at night.

Mrs. Kashikar opens the door for a series of striking darts on Benare. And evidence after evidence is heaped on her. Mrs. Kashikar mercilessly reveals that Benare "made-overtures" to "Rokde, a boy much younger" than herself. Ponkshe, inspite of Benare's implorations not to expose her, blurts out how she asked him to marry her and how she told him that she was with the child. However when he refused to marry her she laughed it off as a joke. And he saw her carrying a bottle of Tig-20 in her bag. Then Karnik discloses her child-love for her maternal uncle. Kaxshikar himself heard her requesting the Chairman of the Education Society to drop an enquiry against her. Nanasaheb Shinde of Bombay, the Chairman, was also ordering angrily to some one on the telephone:

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. (p.113)
Miss. Benare stands stunned and shocked. "The real but covert complaint of the witnesses is that this girl named Benare does not give a lift to any member of the group".5

Dazed and desperate Benare tries to swallow the poison she has while Karnik dashes forward and strikes it away. Now the counsel for prosecution presents his case:

The charge against the accused is one of infanticide. But the accused has committed a far more serious crime. I mean unmarried motherhood. 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 fear that the very existence of society will be in danger. There will be no such thing as moral values left. (p.115)

As the accused's lawyer he faintly pleads for mercy as "Man is ... prone to error", and the mock-judge,

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5. Vijay Tendulkar, "Drama : The most Difficult, But the Most Powerful Medium", Interviews with Indian Writers, New World Literature Series, B.18, p.280.
Mr. Kashikar gives a chance for the accused to speak if she has anything to say.

It is again the sexually suppressed middle class gilded woman at cross-roads that stands here and pours out her heart that has been closed tight for many years. She asserts that

Even your own flesh and blood don't want to understand you. Only one thing in life is all-important—the body. (p. 117)

When she fell in love she was barely fourteen. Then again she fell in love. "It is love for an unusual intellect .... But it was the same mistake" (p. 118) She cared for his intellect but it was her body that her intellectual-god took and went his way. Arundhati Banerjee appreciates this outpouring of Benare's heart:

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. It is important to note here that Tendulkar leaves us in doubt as to whether or not Benare at all delivers the soliloquy, thus suggesting that in all probability what she has to say for herself
is swallowed up by the silence imposed upon her by the authorities. 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 gavel. Benare's monologue is reminiscent of Nora's declaration of independence but lacks the note of protest that characterizes the speech of Ibsen's heroine. It 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. 6

It is the fear of a middle class morally bound being that makes her crave for marriage and beg the undeserving men to marry her and father her child. They lecture on the sacredness of motherhood but none tries to protect this motherhood. The man responsible for the child is himself a coward. This great intellectual "When there is a real-life problem, away he runs! Hides head" and leaves her to face the heartless men who exploits her. As such the play is a satire against middle class male dominated society which is concerned about middle class morality.

These men could not have dared to speak in the presence of Prof. Damle. It is in his absence that they torture Benare. As Sudhir Sonalkar says:

the play is not just violence. It is, of course, about the suppressed sexual violence of our middle class. But it is more than that. It is about the innate savagery in all of us and above all it is a kind of exercise in coming closer to a poetic truth, however ugly.  

The mock-judge, Kashikar, pronounces the final savage judgement:

Marriage is the very foundation of our society's stability. Motherhood must be sacred and pure. (p.118)

And so she would lose her job, the only solace of her and the child would be destroyed in the womb itself.

When Benare collapses sobbing, the other characters exclaim that it is just a "joke" and she has taken it really to heart. This is Tendulkar's "Cold blooded" "moral impartiality" projected through out his plays. When asked in an interview:

This play is a caustic satire on the social as well as legal justice ....
The mental agony suffered by the girl throughout the play is in no way less than the legal punishment .... Is that all you wished to convey or something more?

Tendulkar said:

This is exactly what I had in mind. If I say anything else now, that will be an after thought.... An undaunted girl of Benare's make-up could have, besides defending herself, made a counter-attack, tearing to pieces the do's and don't's of the selfish society.

Tendulkar continued:

Had I shown her aggressive, that would have been my attitude, not hers. Otherwise also the playwright should only suggest leaving the rest to the viewers.8

Benare's final collapse leaves one with a feeling of pity and horror. It is true, "There is in it (the play), pity and horror and not just violence".9

8. Vijay Tendulkar, "Drama : The most Difficult, But the Most Powerful Medium", Interviews with Indian Writers, New World Literature Series, B-18, p.280.
The violence of the play is superbly sugar-coated with the technique of play within the play. Without this technique Tendulkar could not have made his characters directly attack Benare on the charge of infanticide. The play is widely acclaimed for this technique. Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni pays a tribute to the play:

Shantata Court Chalou Aahe comes as a turning point in Tendulkar's career. It has a play in rehearsal and a real-life story, and the two interwine to produce some unusual dramatic confrontations.¹⁰

The dramatic confrontation in the play is between reality and illusion. The mock-trial is an illusion but the charge of infanticide on Benare is a reality. Throughout the play there is a fluctuation between these two forces colliding with each other. Benare herself has been living in an illusion of adoring the intellect of Prof. Damle without giving any thought to its consequence and this illusion becomes unwittingly a reality, that is, the child in her womb. When she

¹⁰ Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, "Contemporary Marathi Theatre", Contemporary Indian Drama, p.10.
is compelled to face the reality she desires to hide it by attempting to give the name of a father to the child in the womb itself. As she fails to do so she is ready to escape from this wasteland of life by swallowing poison. And again it is Benare's irritation with this horror and sordidness of life that makes her wish "to go somewhere far, far away" with Samant because he is free from the maddening violence of the so-called civilized beings.

The violence that these men in the play show towards Benare is a result of their own failure and helplessness in life. They try to take a devilish pleasure in their sadistic behaviour towards Benare. Sukhatme has failed to raise in his profession and he is also ridiculed by his co-actors through the course of the mock-trial. Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar are childless. They have adopted Rokde to escape from boredom. They have no love for him. They simply try to control him. They boss over him and make a puppet of him. On the other hand Rokde is unable to free himself from the shackles of the loveless care of Mrs. and Mr. Kashikar and assert independence. In fact when Benare asks him to marry her he has no
individuality to think and to react to her problem as he is always in the fear of Mrs. and Mr. Kashikar. Just like Sukhatme, Ponkshe is unsuccessful in his aspiration to become a scientist and Karnik likewise is unable to get the recognition of an actor which is his heart's desire. It is well to remember here the analysis of these characters made by Arundhati Banerjee. She says:

The violence that Tendulkar's later plays would be associated with, already makes itself felt in this play. In the persecution of this helpless woman, a fierce psychological violence becomes evident. The latent sadism of the characters, of Sukhatme, of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, of Ponkshe, Karnik or even Rokde, surfaces during the process of the trial. In delineating these characters, Tendulkar has explored their psyches to the extent of revealing the hidden sense of failure pervading their lives - the inefficiency of Sukhatme as a lawyer, the childlessness of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, the non-fulfilment of Ponkshe's dreams to become a scientist, the vain attempts of Karnik to be a successful actor and the inability of Rokde to attain an independent, adult
existence. The figure of the simple hearted villager, Samant, is adeptly handled by the dramatist to offset the complexities of the urbane characters.  

This tremendous capacity of Tendulkar to delve deep into the heart of his characters is often missed by the reader of the play. It is the psychological crisis presented in the character, not only of Benare but also of the others characters, that we come across in the play revealing the writer's insight into his characters. Of course Benare is a lovely spark from the thunderbolt of Tendulkar. She is a New Woman pleading for freedom from the social norms. Even though Tendulkar said that writing this play was a "drudgery" to him, the credit of raising him to the top of the Indian Theatre goes to this play Shantata Court Chalou Aahe.

Tendulkar seems to have experimented with the technique of "play within the play" of a revenge tragedy. But it is integrated into the action and it is not just a scene or an act in the play as in

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Shakespeare's Hamlet but it runs almost throughout the play and the mock-trial is "the thing" itself. This is Tendulkar's contribution to the modern dramatic art of India.

Tendulkar has criticised the middle class morality that throttles the tender desire of Benare, a middle class woman, to mother a child in the play. Tendulkar seems to leave the play without suggesting any solution to the problem. None in the play is ready to at least sympathise with Benare. Only Mr. Kashikar feels that they are going too far in their mock-trial but immediately he silences his conscience. Tendulkar covertly pleads for sympathy with the victims of the society through this flash of humanity for a moment in the heart of Mr. Kashikar.

Viewed from the traditional point of view the story of Benare is similar to that of Kunti in the Mahabharata. Just like Kunti, Benare becomes pregnant without the sanction of wedlock but Kunti being a princess could manage to hide her secret and send away her new-born baby whereas Benare being a middle class woman is exposed to the attacks of the society. The heart-rendering pathos of Benare's
inability to bring up her child is a reminiscence of the pathos of Kunti's grief while leaving her son in the waters of the Ganges. Benare seems to be an archetypal form of Kunti.