CHAPTER III

CRUELTY IN SOCIETY

Silence! the Court is in Session like the other plays of Tendulkar is in the tradition of the Theatre of Cruelty. There is a repulsive sadism in the play. A group of men deliberately trap a young and attractive woman school-teacher and enjoy her acerbic helplessness and Violate all the norms of cultured society by compelling her to confess her illicit love-affair.) Sumit Mitra comments: "The raw brutality and lewdness of Gidhade (Vultures) make a triumphant return in the post-Shantata! (post-Silence) phase". This remark implies that Silence is free from the theme of cruelty of Vultures and Sakharam. However, a gentle and polished cruelty is depicted in the play by Vijay Tendulkar.

Benare, the principal character in the play, is sprightly, rebellious and assertive like 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. She is the "soul of seriousness but she never goes around with a long face". Even innocent Samant complements her: "Miss Benare is really
amazing”, “this lady behaved in a most exemplary manner”, “She’s a very nice lady”. As a teacher she is known for her punctuality. She has never given "a bit of room for disapproval". She says: "I don’t give an inch of it to any one". Her class is scared of her, yet she is adored. She would spend "the last drop of her blood in teaching them". So the other teachers as well as the Principal are jealous of her. She is a keen observer. She can see how Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar have sheltered Rokde in order to flee from the sordidness of their lives and have made "a slave" of him. She is rebellious. She intends to mother her illegitimate child.

(Inspite of her liveliness, efficiency and brilliance, Benare is exploited and humiliated. "Just because of one bit of slander" on her, she becomes a butt of criticism. The cruelty of middle class morality exploits her. Man’s innate capacity to shed his shield of civilization and to violate his sense of humanity springs up from a group of men-actors, among whom she is also a member. All of them prepare 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. As Fate would have it, it is Miss
Benare who suggests it. All the men in her absence conspire together and a mock charge of infanticide is levelled against her as it is "a charge with social significance". She is stunned when Kashikar accuses her of infanticide. She pleads for innocence. "I couldn't even kill a common cockroach. How could I kill a new-born child?" (p.79). But men vultures remain insensitive to her agony.

A savage, ruthless cruelty incipient in the hearts of men discloses itself in the over-whelming evidence showered by men on Benare, the victim. Though at first Karnik declares "The crime itself is imaginary", he later makes overt comments on her: "To the public eye she is unmarried" and "She runs after men too much". When prosecuted by Sukhatme, the mock-prosecutioner, Mr. Karnik, in real life an actor, elevates the trial to the realm of reality by bringing to light a secret that Rokde has seen "the accused in a compromising situation". The other characters in the play, Mrs. Kashikar, Mr. Kashikar, and Sukhatme, render a sadistic encouragement to Rokde, a timid young man with a lack of nerve even to stand in the witness box. Then Benare brings a devastating doom on herself by ceaselessly laughing at Rokde. He summons up his strength and states a humiliating indictment that he has seen Benare in Prof. Damle's room in college.
hostel. Once Prof. Darale's name is announced, it is no longer a mock-trial but a genuine trial and it is here that the mock-seriousness merges with the serious.) It is aptly remarked:

We never know where 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.

There is a sadism latent in the human psyche. It is revealed in the demeanour of Samant. Samant, a naive villager, unconsciously lashes scathing scandals on Benare. He has nothing against Benare. Only to play his part in the mock-trial, he becomes fluent by the faculty of his imagination based on a novel that he has been reading. He continues the evidence. When he went to meet Prof. Damle in his house he found the door locked from inside and over-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 was helpless because he had to protect his reputation.
Benare, unable to contend herself any longer, violently asks them to stop it. But Mrs. Kashikar, dissembling as a well-wisher, endeavours to appease her by directly questioning her why she is flying into such a furious rage if her conscience is clear. At this stage Benare comprehends their cruel plot to expose her and she accuses them, "you're all deliberately ganged up on me." (p.93) With these heartrendering words she attempts to flee from the hall. But when she tries to unbolt the door she finds it locked from outside "irretrievably trapping her in her immediate environment". Benare's imprisonment in the hall shows that there is a kind of strict discipline guiding things towards their inexorable destination, whatever the price that we have to pay.

Evil inherent in human nature contributes to the strict discipline and it reveals itself in their cruelty towards Benare. Like a butcher Mrs. Kashikar drags her back to the witness box. Now the trial advances towards its impending goal. And revengefully they expose her private life. They discuss her age. They wonder how she remained a spinster till the age of thirty four. Kashikar makes a sweeping generalization that the girls should be married off before puberty. Sukhatme demands Benare to confess how she
has remained unmarried to such an advanced age. Mrs. Kashikar relentlessly remarks: "That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying". (p.99) She raises a suspicion of her character, "Why must she have Prof. Damle, and Damle alone, to see her home after a performance?". (p.100) For Benare has always been asking Prof. Damle to accompany her after a performance is over at night.

Mrs. Kashikar unsympathetically starts a series of obscene slanders on Benare. She reveals that the latter "made overtures" to "Rokde, a boy much younger" than herself. Immediately Ponkshe, in spite of Benare's implorations not to expose her, blurts out that she has asked him to marry her and she has shared her secret with him that she is 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 TIK-20 in her bag. Then Karnik discloses her child-love for her maternal uncle. Kashikar tells another stunning truth that he himself heard her requesting the Chairman of the Education Society to give up an enquiry against her. Nanasaheb Shinde of Bombay, the Chairman, was also telling angrily to someone 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)

A taste for crime and sexuality lies dormant in the human psyche. They create a psychological turmoil for Benare. "The real but covert complaint of the witness is that this girl named Benare does not give a lift to any member of the group". Dazed and desperate as if in a nightmare Benare tries to swallow the poison she has while Karnik dashes forward and strikes it away. But their incipient sense of spitefulness is not appeased and so they, continue their prosecution and 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 meekly appeals for mercy as "Man is ... prone to error", and the mock-judge, (Mr. Kashikar, gives a nominal chance for the accused to defend herself.)

The savagery of these accusers compels the sexually suppressed middle class gilded woman stand at cross-roads here and pour out her heart that has been closed tight for many years. She expresses her bitter helplessness:

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, at first, she fell in love she was barely fourteen. Then again when she fell in love: "It is love for an unusual intellect .... But it was the same mistake" (p.118). She
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.

(It is the cruelty of middle class morality that makes her crave for marriage and beg the undeserving men to marry her and father her child. They uphold 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 exploit her. As such the play exposes the cruelty of 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:

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:  

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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 sympathetically exclaim that it is just a "joke" and she has taken it seriously. This is Tendulkar's "Cold blooded" "Cruelty" 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.

(Benare's final collapse leaves one with a feeling of pity and horror. The cruelty 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
intertwine to produce some unusual dramatic confrontations.

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 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 tries to escape from this wasteland of life by swallowing poison. And again it's her disgust with this horror and sordidness of life that makes her wish "to go somewhere far, far way" with Samant because he is free from the maddening cruelty of the so called civilized beings.

The latent spitefulness of these men towards Benare is a result of their own failure and frustration in life. They take a devilish pleasure in their treacherous
behaviour towards Benare. Sukhatme has failed to raise in his profession and he is ridiculed by his co-actors through the course of the mock-trial. Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar are childless. They have adopted Rokde as a commodity to escape from their boredom. They have no love for him. They merely 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. When Benare asks him to marry her he has no individuality to think and to react to her problem as he is afraid of Mrs. and Mr. Kashikar. Like Sukhatme, Ponkshe is unsuccessful in his aspiration to become a scientist and Karnik likewise is unable to gain the recognition of an actor which is his ambition. Out of their disappointment, springs up the exploitation of Benare for sheer pleasure.

Arundhati Banerjee analyses their sadism:

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 Ponshe'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, not only of Benare but also of the other characters, presented in the play that reveals the writer's insight into his characters. Of course, Benare is a high-spirited 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 zenith of the Indian Theatre goes to this play Shantata Court Chalou Aahe.
Tendulkar has experimented with the technique of "play within the play" of a revenge tragedy. It is integrated into the action and it is not just a scene or an act in the play as in 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.

Tendulkar has depicted the cruelty of the middle class morality that throttles the tender desire of Benare, a middle class woman, to mother a child through the play within the play. Tendulkar leaves the play without suggesting any solution to the problem because his intention is only to present the problem and to disturb the minds of the audience. None in the play sympathizes 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 shown 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 manages to hide her secret and sends away her new-born baby whereas Benare being a middle class woman is exposed to the attacks of the society. As the sun-god leaves Kunti to face the agony of an unmarried mother, Prof. Damle leaves Benare to endure the onslaugths of the cruel men. The heart-rending 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 is an archetypal form of Kunti.)
REFERENCES:

* Arundhati Banerjee, "Silence! the Court is in Session", Five Plays, Vijay Tendulkar (Bombay : OUP, 1992). p.57. All further references are from this text parenthetically quoted.


3. Ibid., p.36.


