

Subaltern's Voice in Vijay Tendulkar's Play *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) occupies an important place in contemporary Indian dramatic literature along with Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Mohan Rakesh. Besides twenty eight full length plays, he has also written twenty-four one-act plays. He was deeply concerned with the socio-political controversy of the contemporary society that forms the background for his plays. Many of his plays such as *The Vultures* (1961), *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *Encounter in Ubugland* (1969), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kamala* (1981) and *Kanyadaan* (1983) present this socio-political conflict in past as well as in the contemporary world. Moreover, his plays highlight the aloofness of modern man to present day politics, the friction between the society and the individual, relationship between man and woman, social awareness, Dalit's concern and such other social issues. *Silence! The Court is in Session* depicts women's subjugated and downtrodden condition and the conflict between an individual and the society on the basis of religion, sexuality and gender conflict in twentieth century male dominated society. But before analyzing the play, it would be apt to look briefly at the subaltern theory, an important aspect of the postcolonial era.

Subaltern theory treats the 'other' as those who were being segregated on the basis of class, sex, race, economy and had no voice of their own. The theory categorically asserts that conventions and traditions are entirely set up by those who are in authority. The term 'Subaltern' came to be used for colonized people in South Asian subcontinent in the 1970s. It throws light on the history of the colonized from a new dimension, i. e., from the perspective of the colonized rather than from the hegemonic power. It is used for those who are economically and politically inferior of the dominant power edifice. On the other hand, there are critics who use this term for marginalized and the lower sections of the society. This term literally means "an officer in a subordinate position." Originally used by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci for the proletariat and working class people, the term carried a key connotation with the publication of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay entitled "Can the Subaltern Speak" ? (1988) that was later expanded in her book entitled *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). It is one of the most debatable and influential essays on postcolonial theory. Here, she questions

whether the colonized could raise voice against their wretched state or not. Raman Selden states "Spivak's awareness of the subaltern who can not speak makes the question of clarity all the more pertinent . . ." ¹

By and large, this label was used synonymously for 'untouchables', 'tribals', and above all 'women' in general. Elleke Boehmer opines :

Spivak's contribution to the understanding of the subaltern state under colonialism (*subalternity*), was to expand its signification to include groups even more downgraded than these, and those who do not figure on the social scale at all: for example, tribals or unscheduled castes, untouchables, and, within all these groups, women.²

Furthermore,

For Spivak, therefore, the proper object of postcolonial criticism must be the representational systems that effect the construction, rewriting, and indeed silencing of the female subaltern in the first place.³

Homi K. Bhabha, another influential figure of postcolonial theory and the writer of *The Location of Culture* (1994), underlines the significance of the power of society in connection with his definition of subaltern as those who were being oppressed, looked-down, and minority groups and whose presence was essential before the majority group and those who were in power. He was of the view that subaltern social groups are in such a position that they can undermine the control of hegemonic power. He highlights the experiences of social marginality as it was rampant in the society.

Edward Said's work *Orientalism* (1978) is yet another landmark in the history of postcolonial criticism. M. A. R. Habib enunciates :

In *Orientalism* (1978) Said examines the vast tradition of Western "constructions" of the Orient. This tradition of Orientalism has been a "corporate institution" for coming to terms with the Orient, for authorizing views about it and ruling over it.⁴

The ideas expressed in this book may also be associated with the concept of subaltern for it explains how Westerners have regarded the Orientals. Said cogitates that Westerners have created a false and illusionary concept for the Orientals. They treat them as uncivilized, savage, illiterate and irrational and were in dire need of modification in order to be rational and civilized. In this way, these so-called Westerners were not ready to hear the voices of Orientals. Thus, the term 'subaltern' has been variously used by different theorist in different contexts but, nonetheless, their concern is focused on those sections of society who were looked down upon by those who were in power. Women among all sects of the society have always been regarded as 'other' by male figures. They were thought as weaker, irrational and uncivilized. It is something other that men have written about them, love them, need them, praise them; but all this have been done for their personal gain. This is Spivak's concern too, i. e., women's voice in a male dominated society. And it is from this angle that this paper seeks to analyze Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session*.

The publication of *Silence! The Court is in Session*, brought Tendulkar to a focus of significant critical merit. The play is divided into three Acts and emphasizes the

falsity of middle-class male dominated society. It presents the pathetic lot of Miss Leela Benare, as the central protagonist of the play. As the play opens, it is revealed that a 'Mock Law Court' is about to be held in the village hall where the artists from Bombay are supposed to gather. Jyoti Havnurkar articulates :

The play begins innocuously enough with what appears to be almost desultory conversation among the artistes of a dramatic troupe, as they arrive group-by-group in a village where they are supposed to perform a show from their repertoire.⁵

Benare is the first one to arrive in the hall while Samant is the next one. As he enters, he is confused to see the bleeding finger of Benare because of her mishandling the bolt. He reminds her about the same happenings to himself. Without caring about such trifle things, she feels amused in his company. Suddenly, she says something to Samant that makes him wonder.

... Let's leave everyone behind, I thought, and go somewhere far, far away-with you!⁶

Furthermore, her sense of likeness is more evident when she says- "You're very nice indeed. And shall I tell you something? You are a very pure and good person. I like you."⁷

Such remarks make Samant wonder as to why she likes him so much. But she goes on in her vocation and asks him about his marital status innocently. The moment she learns that he is single, her desire to possess him becomes more intense and strong. She goes very close to him and Samant finding himself in proximity extends his finger towards her. She pretends it to be an excuse and goes even closer to him. She brings all her effort into practice to seduce Samant for physical relationship but seeing him totally indifferent towards her advances, she considers him to be the best company for the time being till others come. She talks about her profession as a school teacher and praises her students and regards them even better than some adults.

They're so much better than adults. At least they don't have blind pride of thinking they know everything. . . . They don't scratch you till you bleed, then run away like cowards. . . .⁸

Perhaps Professor Damle was in her mind while making such remarks as it is evident later in the play itself. We are also aware about her pregnancy by Professor Damle. Her hand unexpectedly goes upon her swelling belly; she becomes somehow embarrassed when her eyes meet with Samant. Her sense of individualistic attitude comes on surface when she asserts :

... 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 will do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide. . . .⁹

Samant is ashamed to see all this, therefore, expresses his desire to go outside to know about other co-actors. But she restrains him saying that she is afraid to be there all alone. Samant surmises perhaps she is not well, so, he asks about her health. In order to prove that she is perfectly well, she starts singing in full vigour :

Oh, I've got a sweetheart
Who carries all my books,
He plays in my doll house,
And says he likes my looks,
I'll tell you a secret-
He wants to marry me.
But Mummy says, I'm too little
To have such thoughts as these.¹⁰

To quote N.S. Dharan:-

The song carries dramatic significance, as it anticipates Karnik's disclosure of Benare's fruitless love for her maternal uncle in the third Act.¹¹

Benare, now, moves further and demonstrates about other co-actors sarcastically as : 'Mr. Kashikar' - 'Mr. Prime objective', 'Mrs. Kashikar' - 'Mrs. Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle', 'Sukhatme' - 'an Expert on the Law', 'Ponkshe' - 'Hmm! Sci-en-tist! Inter-failed'. We also learn about the childless fate of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar. Moreover, she exclaims about Professor Damle :

And we have an Intellectual too. That means someone who prides himself on his booklearning. But when there's a real life problem, away he runs! Hides his head. He's not here today. Won't be coming, either. He wouldn't dare!¹²

Arrival of other co-actors gives the play a turn. But at the same time Prof. Damle's and Rawte's absence becomes conspicuous. Kashikar predicts that the trial is not just for entertainment. It has some important message too. Sukhatme alleviates Kashikar's anxiety suggesting that he will play the role of Prof. Damle besides playing the role 'of the prosecuting counsel' while Rawte's role was assigned to Samant who seems upset for he has never played such a role and it would be very tough for him to be with these sophisticated actors. Others allay his fear insisting it just to be a game and he will be given proper training in due course of time. Finally, all arrangements for the trial are made. Benare makes it clear that the issue of the trial is- "A case against President Johnson for producing atomic weapons."¹³

But as Benare goes into the inner room for washing her face, other co-actors start hatching a conspiracy against her. Karnik asks Ponkshe whether he knows something about Benare. He persuades him hinting that he, too, wants to say something about her. On Sukhatme's suggestion it is decided that now the trial would be against Miss Benare for committing a social crime. Towards the closure of the first act, Kashikar, the judge of the Mock Law court, asserts that Miss Benare has been arrested on charges of felony.

Prisoner Miss Benare, under Section No.302 of the Indian Penal Code you are accused of the crime of infanticide. Are you guilty or not guilty of the aforementioned crime?¹⁴

Benare's condition after the allegation of such charges becomes very pathetic and intolerable. On hearing it, Benare, as N. S. Dharan puts it "is stunned, and the entire atmosphere becomes extraordinarily somber and tense."¹⁵

In this “somber and tense” ambience the second Act opens. However, after a while the aura becomes gay with the entry of Samant who has brought *pan*, cigarette, and *beedees* for them. The main issue of the trial is changed and turns into a *pan*-spitting contest. The introduction of this comic relief is dramatically significant as it is convenient for Benare in regaining her composure. But, in due course of time the vibe once again becomes grim when Benare realizes the conspiracy hatched against her by the so-called male-chauvinists. When Benare is forced to accept the guilt, she uncouthly asks Kashikar whether he will accept such charges against himself. Later on, Mr. Ponshe is called as the first witness to uncover the guilt of Miss Benare. The communion between Sukhatme and Ponshe is also highly remarkable.

SUKHATME. Mr. Ponshe, is the accused married or unmarried?

PONKSHE. Why don't you ask the accused?

SUKHATME. But if you were asked, what would you say?

PONKSHE. To the public eye, she is unmarried.¹⁶

Such conversations are enough to unveil the secrecy of Miss Benare. Ponshe goes on to mention that Benare enjoys the company of men and “she runs after” them. It's a natural phenomenon that people of opposite sex are attracted towards each other, then, what is wrong in Benare's case if she is interested more and more towards males? Moreover, when Sukhatme asks Ponshe about her close relationship with any married or unmarried man, she herself says interrupting the court – “Yes, with the counsel for the prosecution himself! And with the judge. To say nothing of Ponshe, Balu here or Karnik.”¹⁷

Consequently, Mr. Karnik is called as the second witness. Sukhatme asks about his knowledge of Miss Benare. He evades making a straight commitment. When forced to reply in concrete terms, he admits it vaguely because-” It's strange! Sometimes we feel we know someone. But in fact we don't. Truth is stranger than fiction.”¹⁸ Then, Karnik is asked to explain the meaning of the term ‘mother’. He replies a mother is one who gives birth to the children but Sukhatme does not agree saying a bitch also gives birth to a puppy. Karnik says of course, it gives and will be called a mother. Finally, he is postulated whether the accused has ever tried to have an agreement with him. He declines for having such agreement, however, admits Rokde has had the same.

Rokde comes as the third witness. He is interrogated vigorously to admit something in this connection. Mrs. Kashikar requests Balu Rokde to give a fantastic bit of clue against the accused Miss Benare. Rokde is panic-stricken in admitting any such token. Perspirations are rolling from his forehead. Suddenly, he looks towards Benare and with great valour enumerates that a few days ago when he went to Prof. Damle's house, he was astonished to see Miss Benare at his house at night. Benare contradicts and says that all this has been pre-planned to make her ashamed before others.

There is no need at all to drag my private life into this. I can visit whom I like.

Damle wasn't eating me up.¹⁹

But Sukhatme is pleased to know about her personal affair and is curious enough to know more. He provokes Rokde to reveal more. Thus, he expresses his shock to see

her there in the evening hour. Such charges make Benare's condition just like a fish out of water. She makes them aware that if someone is with someone, it does not mean that he/she is of loose character. If she will be seen in her principal's chamber then does it mean there is something wrong between them? Sukhatme says that these points are also notable as proof. Being infuriated, she remarks- “If you like, I'll give you the names and addresses of twenty-five more people with whom I am alone at times. . . .”²⁰

Subsequently, Mr. Samant, the fourth witness is called. As he has already captured the discomfiture of Benare, he does not want to admit further. Thus, when asked about his visiting Prof. Damle's house, he responds in such a way as if he knew nothing :

Where? No, no! Why that room's in Bombay! And I was in this village.

Hardly! It's silly-I don't know your Professor Damle from Adam. How could I get to his room? Isn't that right? What are you up to!²¹

But when convinced that this is just a mock-trial, Samant starts publicizing about her in idiosyncratic manner. He says that once he went to Prof. Damle's house, it was locked from inside. He rang the bell. Prof. Damle came out and asked whom he wanted to meet. As he said,- “Prof. Damle”, he (the person who came out) simply replied “he is not at home” and closed the door. But since he had had to deliver an important message, he stood outside in a great dilemma as what to do. Synchronically, he heard someone crying inside the room. The crying was not of a man but of a woman. He wondered to see all this and did not think it to be someone from Damle's family members because no one would cry in such a secretive tone in her own house. Therefore, he stood there to quench his curiosity. He heard the conversation between them. This sort of evidences thrilled other co-actors. And they became eager to know more. At last Samant accords :

If you will abandon me in this condition, where shall I go?

.....

‘Where you should go is entirely your problem. I feel great sympathy for you. But I can do nothing. I must protect my reputation?’ At that, the women said, ‘That's all, you can talk about, your reputation? How heartless you are!’ He replied, ‘Nature is heartless.’

.....

‘If you abandon me, I shall have no choice but to take my life.’ ‘Then do that. I also have no choice. If you kill yourself, I shall be in torment.’²²

Hearing such allegations, Benare once again becomes nervous and requests Samant not to move any further, otherwise, she will leave the hall. Caught in the situation, she denies all the charges levelled against her remarking, “You've all deliberately ganged upon me! You've plotted against me!”²³ But Sukhatme is still not satisfied and requests Samant to go further. Knowing such allegations, Benare's eyes are full of tears and they are constantly rolling upon her cheek. Once again the atmosphere becomes grave and serious. Subsequently, Samant realizes Benare's seriousness. He says, “Dear, oh dear! Whatever's happened so suddenly to the lady?”²⁴ Eventually, Benare makes up her mind to leave the room taking her bag, purse, etc. but she is horrified to see the door closed from outside. This Act comes to an end here with the words of Sukhatme, beseeching Kashikar to call Miss Benare to the witness-box.

The last Act opens with the utterances of Sukhatme inviting Miss Benare to come to the witness-box. But she remains adamant and is not ready to utter a single syllable. Mrs. Kashikar, dragging her forces to take an oath to be truthful. Here, the dramatist provides ample chance to Mrs. Kashikar to torment Miss Benare. Perhaps, this has been done to expose another mental set-up of the people. Generally, people have firm faith that women are jealous by nature and do not like to see the happiness of others. Mrs. Kashikar being a childless lady, looks towards Benare with contemptible eyes perhaps because she is about to become a mother. Further, Sukhatme asks Benare to state her age but she is silent. This makes other co-actors furious. Sukhatme remarks :

Prisoner Benare, it is your responsibility to answer any questions put to you as a witness. [*Pausing a little*] Prisoner Benare, What are you waiting for? Answer the question!²⁵

She is still silent, therefore, Mrs. Kashikar states she must be around thirty-two. To know this, other co-actors wonder as how she has kept herself unmarried till such an advanced age? Kashikar thinks it to be one of the most important causes of promiscuity. Parents should take care of their children especially female ones and they must arrange for their wedlock “before puberty”. If this is done, these evils will ultimately come to an end. Sukhatme wants to know the motive behind her remaining unmarried till then. Mrs. Kashikar candidly says :

... That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort ... That's how promiscuity has spread throughout our society.²⁶

It is enough to disclose the contemporary situation of the Indian society. With the use of the term ‘everything’ Mrs. Kashikar’s implication is the physical relationship between male and female, that has been understood by male actors too, but despite this they oblige Mrs. Kashikar to elucidate this term. Here, Mrs. Kashikar realizes that she has thrown egg on her own face, so, she tried to give the distorted meaning of the term, i. e., to change the topic. Once again, Rokde is summoned for giving further evidences against Miss Benare. Mrs. Kashikar reminds Rokde of an incident of the misbehaviour of Benare. She had caught his hand in the dark. Rokde admits that whatever Mrs. Kashikar has said is right adding that when he opposed it, Benare intimidated him to keep it secret, otherwise, she would ruin his life. After deliberate thinking, Benare contradicts him that all such allegations are just a lie. But Rokde goes on to say that he had slapped her also.

Mr. Ponshe is invited once again who adds fuel to the flames. He says that Benare wanted to marry him. She had also told him about her love affair with a man that has resulted in her pregnancy. In the words of Ponshe :

Miss Benare made me promise never to tell anyone the name of the man-who so she said-had made her pregnant. So far I've kept my word.²⁷

Everyone starts persuading him to disclose the name of the man. Ultimately, he discloses it to be none other than Prof. Damle.

Afterward, Mr. Karnik comes to contradict Rokde and informs that it was Miss Benare who had slapped. Miss Benare accosted him to marry for the sake of the unborn

child but when he refused, she had slapped him in pique. As there are contradictions in their nub, Sukhatme compromises the situation :

Thank you, Mr. Karnik. This means that it is true the accused was pressing Rokde to marry her. The only difference in what you say is about who slapped whom.²⁸

Furthermore, Karnik reveals another secret - Miss Benare’s unsuccessful love affair with her own maternal uncle that is regarded as incest.

Now, Sukhatme himself expresses his opinion in this matter. Sexual relationship and bringing the child before marriage, he opines, is a grave sin.

... Motherhood without marriage has always been considered a very great sin by our religion and traditions. ... But bringing up the child of an illegal union is certainly more horrifying. ...²⁹

While such allegations were being inflicted on Miss Benare, she was left with no other choice than to listen to all this. She is filled with a sense of disgust and resentment for all these hypocritical men. Subsequently, when Kashikar asks Benare if she wants to say anything in her defense before the verdict is announced, she pounces upon this opportunity stating that since she has not uttered a single syllable, she has “a lot to say”. There follows a fairly long monologue by her. She states that she was gripped with a sense of fear since no one was by her side when she was in difficulty. The persons whom she regarded her own had deserted her. No one is there who can empathize with her mental trauma and anguish. She has only and only disgust for this world, therefore, it is not worth while to live :

... 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. ...³⁰

She affirms about everyone’s individualistic life where no one is supposed to butt in. It depends on the individuals to decide about their personal affair. She unveils the ambidextrous nature of the males whose sole obsession was on her belly and blossoming youth. They have had nothing to do with her agony :

... 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. ...³¹

By and by, she confesses her sin of falling in love with her own maternal uncle when she was in her teen-age and hardly knew the meaning of sin :

... It's true, I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother's brother. But in our strict house, in the prime of my unfolding youth, he was the one who came close to me. He praised my bloom everyday. ... , it was a sin! Why, I was hardly fourteen! I didn't even know what sin was-- I swear by my mother, I didn't! ...³²

Tears rolled out of her eyes while divulging this sin. She also discloses that everyone including her mother was against this match. The man, i.e., her uncle himself was against marrying her. She realizes her fault in providing her body to him but all this was futile to think now. Her sense of disgust for him finds expression in these words :

... I felt like smashing his face in public and spitting on it! ...³³

As a grown up lady, again she fell in love and thought it to be fruitful. But she was wrong. The man, whom she regarded as a god, gave her body to him subsequently resulting in her pregnancy, knocked her down and did not give shelter. He was interested only in satisfying his sexual appetite :

... He wasn't a god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! That is all! Again, the body! ...³⁴

She predicts that it is her body that has brought such a plight. Her agony comes out ultimately when she remarks :

... This body is a traitor! [*She is writhing with pain.*] I despise this body—and I love it! I hate it, but it's all you have, in the end, isn't it? ... And where will you go if you reject it? ...³⁵

Finally, she professes her desire to live for the sake of her future child. It shows that there is a strong passion to become a mother. As N.S. Dharan states :

She asserts in pain and anxiety that hers is a selfless mother's quest founded on her would-be son's most essential needs. The boy must have a mother, a father, a house and a good reputation in society.³⁶

After confessing her sin, she becomes silent. It is time for the pronouncement of the verdict. But before it, Kashikar utters something that is also remarkable. He regards motherhood as a noble and pure entity, but if someone has an illicit love affair, it is not acceptable either by society or religion. Since Miss Benare has committed this crime, therefore, the court passes the judgement that the foetus must be destroyed, although, she will be allowed to live. Benare shrieks out, groans in pain to receive such an illogical verdict :

No! No! No!-I won't let you do it. I won't let it happen, I won't let it happen!³⁷

Uttering these words, she comes at the stool meant for defense counsel, sits on it and collapses. There is stern silence.

It is here that someone comes from outside and enquires about the beginning of the show. Samant informs them to come after five minutes. The other co-actors are busy in dressing themselves for performance but the frozen figure of Benare captures their eye and they make all effort to get her up but all this was futile. They remind her that it was just a mock-trial, therefore, she must not feel hurt and should not take it by heart. Then, they enter the inner room leaving Samant all alone in the hall. He gazes at the frozen and inactive figure of Benare. He also tries to wake her up. Seeing that there is no response, he places the artificial parrot, that he has brought for his nephew as it is introduced in the opening of the play, before Benare, and comes outside. As he comes out, an unknown voice comes from the hall as if it is of Miss Benare singing a poem.

The parrot to the sparrow said,
'Why, oh why, are your eyes so red?'

...

O sparrow, sparrow, poor little sparrow ...³⁸

It is here that the play comes to an end and we are left to draw our own conclusion regarding the future of Miss Benare. It may be assumed that the poem elucidates Prof. Damle's ill-treatment with Miss Benare.

To conclude, it may be conjectured that the play is a satire on the custom and hypocrisy of the middle class male-dominated society whose mere concern is to maintain the moral code. It is this convention because of which Miss Benare is in search of a man whom she can marry so that her unborn child will have a proper status in society and she can have her own reputation as well as people will not call her a whore/prostitute. At this point the question that strikes our mind is -Why not the co-actors accuse that hypocrite who has made her pregnant? Indulging in such a crime is the equal guilt of both male and female. Nobody cares about the hypocrite male figure and only poor Miss Benare is taken as target. Why? It is only because the society is male-dominated where women are not allowed to raise voice against their subjugated state. Finally, she expresses the hypocrisy of the male-chauvinists. While going through this play we have already noticed that Miss Benare is not allowed to speak when she wanted to say something in defense of her charges. She was again and again reprimanded to maintain silence while the court was in session. On the other hand, physical relationship should not be established outside marriage, otherwise, there will be no difference between human beings and animals. Marriage as a social institution will have no meaning if we indulge in sexual relationship before marriage. Therefore, if someone is found in such heinous activity, both of them should be mated equal punishment. But what generally happens is that after the exposure of such a sin only women are condemned.

The dramatist, though a male himself, is not biased against women and represent the reality of cotemporary society objectively. He makes us aware of the problem, although, he does not provide any solution and leaves it on the audiences/readers to draw their own conclusion.

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