

Chastity and Emancipation: A Reading on Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* through the lens of E.V. Periyar's *Why Were Women Enslaved?*

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Abstract

This article aims to scrutinize the status of women in Indian patriarchal society and explore its implications through an analysis of the fictional characters Miss Leela Benare and Mrs. Kashikar. These characters exemplify the misery faced by women in a misogynistic society, and Vijay Tendulkar portrays them as an emerging modern woman who strives to liberate herself from the chains of Indian society's orthodox and traditional bondages. Through the lens of feminism and the work of E.V. Periyar, 'Why Were Women Enslaved?' the researcher argues that the empowerment of women is possible only through their prosperous education and equal rights to their wealth.

Keywords: Chastity, Emancipation, Patriarchy, Misogyny and Orthodox.

Introduction:

The play *Shankata! Court Chalu Ahe*, written by Vijay Tendulkar, was translated into English as *Silence! The Court is in Session* by Priya Adarkar, deals with the complexities of societal norms and gender dynamics. The play's plot is inspired by a real-life incident involving an amateur group of players staging a mock trial in Bombay's sub-urban area. Over the entire play, Vijay Tendulkar employs satire,

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humor, and irony. Vijay Tendulkar, a prominent modern playwright, is known for addressing the sufferings of the female community in contemporary society. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, the central character, Miss Benare, is a thirty-two-year-old spinster who works as a schoolteacher and is also part of the drama troupe, the Sonar Moti Tenement Association. Unlike the other troupe members, Miss Benare is well-educated and has a respectable career as a school teacher. Presenting the character of Miss Benare and the interactions within the drama troupe during the mock trial, Tendulkar reflects on how women are struggling between traditional and modern values in his contemporary society.

This article expounds the nature of women in Indian patriarchal society with the formulation that E.V. Periyar has delved on in his work *Why Were Women Enslaved?* The concepts that are persuaded and illustrated by E.V. Periyar are learnt with the characters that Vijay Tendulkar portrays in *Silence! The Court is in Session*. The article attempts to persuade the need for social transformation by underpinning the issues of women, and by providing solution.

In *Why Were Women Enslaved?* E.V. Periyar indicates the definition and universal meaning of the word chastity, “living up to one’s words”; that is, it contains the concepts of integrity, truth and abiding by an agreement” (01). He vividly denounces how men “use the word ‘chastity’ and the method of its usage are false and created with the intention of enslaving women” and points out that chastity is a concept that applies to both men and women (36). In addition, E.V. Periyar highlights the ulterior motives of male feminists, who aim to subjugate women by enforcing traditional and societal norms. Melancholically, he points out that women are the real barriers to women’s freedom because they have enmity and envy within themselves. With these perspectives, E.V. Periyar reveals that fruitful education and equality in wealth can only unchain women’s slavery and allow them to lead a peaceful and independent life in this patriarchal Indian society.

Chastity:

Indian patriarchal society has established cultural traditions and societal norms that grant men significant privileges, while their customs and beliefs oppress women. As illustrated in the play, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Vijay Tendulkar replicates the societal expectations imposed on women and sheds light on how harshly they are judged for straying from these norms. Utilizing the mock trial as a chance, the members of the drama troupe—Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Balu Rokde, and Karnik—disgrace Miss Benare by accusing her of adultery and being pregnant. Regarding adultery and unwedded motherhood, Sukhatme delivers a fiery prosecution:

Her conduct has blackened all social and moral values. The accused is public enemy number one. If such socially destructive tendencies are encouraged to flourish, this country and its culture will be totally destroyed . . . 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 have dreadful fear that the very existence of society will be in danger. There will be no such thing as moral values left . . . The accused has plotted to dynamite the very roots of our tradition, our pride in ourselves, our culture and our religion. (99-100)

This accusation demonstrates the dominance patriarchal tradition, culture, and religion have over women. People often hastily blame women and accuse them of engaging in illicit behavior when public instances of adultery or infidelity emerge. This knee-jerk reaction highlights societal biases and the unfair scrutiny placed on women in such situations. Through the Benare-Dame scenario, Vijay Tendulkar satirizes and exposes society's lopsided treatment of women. Ponshe unveils the covert relationship between Prof. Damle and Miss Benare, revealing that Damle was responsible for the baby in her womb. Upon hearing this, Mrs. Kashikar and others comment on the possibility of a woman engaging in an affair with a married man who already has five children. But at the same time, they do not blame or deplore how a married man with five children can have an affair with an unmarried woman. In addition to this revelation, Karnik adds his accusation regarding Miss Benare, stating that she "attempted suicide because of disappointment in life" and "fell in love at the age of fifteen, with her own maternal uncle!" (93). In *Why Were Women Enslaved?* E.V. Periyar resolutely condemns this prejudice, "there is no custom for calling a man a male-prostitute . . . even if he is blamed in that manner, he doesn't get angry. Even men get angry only if they are called son-of-a- prostitute and not if they are called son-of-a-male-prostitute" (34).

Despite these serious accusations against her character, no one is willing to lend their ears to hear Miss Benare's side of the story or provide her with a fair opportunity to defend herself. Even during the mock trial, Miss Benare is given only ten seconds to speak in defense of her fairness. While discussing women's freedom, E.V. Periyar manifests, "The concept of chastity that deals a different justice to each sex must be destroyed and an equal, self-governing concept of chastity for both sexes must come into place. Forced marriages, where people are tied to loveless places for chastity's sake, must be destroyed" (04). This perspective sheds light on the struggles faced by female characters like Miss Benare in the play as they strive against societal constraints and discrimination, advocating for their right to autonomy and fair treatment within both legal and social systems.

In reality, women's fairness and rights are often restricted by patriarchal societal norms. As a result, afflicted women are pushed to the fringes of society, leading to negative stereotypes and perceptions about them. The public does not try to ponder women's fairness and rights but blindly believes the notions that culture and tradition put forth about women. Men, like wolves in a cruel and unfair society, trap women like innocent lambs. Sylvia Walby in *Theorizing Patriarchy* observes this domination. She says: "In this system women's labour power, women's reproduction, women's sexuality, women's mobility and property and other economic resources – are under patriarchal control" (Walby 20).

As a victim, Miss Benare raises her voice against the false accusation made by Karnik. She states:

It's true, I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother's brother.....he was the one who came close to me. He praised my bloom every day. He gave me love How was I to know that if you felt like breaking yourself into bits and melting into one with someone—If you felt that just being with him gave a whole meaning to life—and if he was your uncle, 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! (105)

She also firmly admits that he was very passionate and could hardly contain herself. The second person who exploited her and left her in the lurch was Prof. Damle. She describes him as “my intellectual god took the offering and went his way. He didn't want my mind or my devotion—he didn't care about them! 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!” (105-106). Besides that, she sorrowfully states how her private life can offend her teaching career, even though she:

did not teach any of this to those tender, young souls. I swallowed that poison, but didn't even let a drop of it touch them! I taught them beauty, I taught them purity. I cried inside, I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair and I taught them hope. For what sin are they robbing me of my job, my only comfort? My private life is my own business. I'll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to! That can't be anyone else's business, understand? Everyone has a bent, a manner, an aim in life. What's anyone else to do with these? (103-104)

E.V. Periyar deliberately denounces chastity as a “state of absolute purity devoid of any sex. So, chastity is not related to women alone; it can also be taken to mean that once a man/woman has had sex, he/she has lost chastity, irrespective of their subsequent purity” (02).

During the mock trial, neither Prof. Damle nor Miss Benare's maternal uncle are summoned. None of Miss Benare's immediate colleagues voice even a single condemnation of their demeaning act of adultery. The court allows them to go scot-free, but it punishes Miss Benare very harshly. This disparity highlights society's double standards in measuring the actions of men and women. Through the play, Tendulkar satirizes society's bias and unfair treatment towards women. Tendulkar's female subaltern is similar with subaltern of Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. “If... the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadows.” (Spivak 28). Benare is the subaltern who is deprived of speech and justice.

Indian patriarchal society often conceals men's wrongdoings while ignoring women's virtuous deeds. During the mock trial, the men of the drama troupe—Mr. Kashikar, Karnik, Ponkshe, and Sukhatme—order unhealthy items like sweet paan, Wills cigarettes, beedis, and masala paan. Despite the negative impact of these

products on health and society, their actions are not considered grave mistakes. On the contrary, Miss Benare does not consume any tobacco products, which is commendable, yet her actions are not acknowledged by others. Mr. Kashikar, Karnik, Ponkshe, Balu Rokde, and Samant fabricate false evidence against Miss Benare. Balu Rokde once misbehaved toward Miss Benare and was rightfully slapped by her. This scenario highlights the gender biases and double standards prevalent in Indian society. Men's actions, which include unhealthy habits and deceit, are downplayed or ignored, while women's righteous behavior and self-defence are not given due recognition.

Emancipation:

Memorably, the word emancipation appears in the Emancipation Proclamation of Abraham Lincoln's Order of 1863, which freed enslaved African people in America. Emancipation can be described as an act of gaining freedom or liberation from oppressive conditions. From the commencement to the culmination of the play, Vijay Tendulkar objectively emphasises women's emancipation through patriarchal norms, traditions, orthodox, discrimination, misogyny, oppression, and inequality. In the opening act of the play, Miss Benare discloses herself as an empowered woman. She tells Samant that people around her are jealous of her self-determined life. Furthermore, she painfully asserts:

That's why people are jealous. Specially the other teachers and the management. But what can they try, what can they do? they're holding an enquiry, if you please! But my teaching's perfect. I've put my whole life into it—I've worn myself to a shadow in this job! Just because of one bit of slander, what can they do to me? Throw me out? Let them! I haven't hurt anyone. Anyone at all! If I've hurt anybody, it's been myself. But is that any kind of reason for throwing me out? Who are these people to say what can or can't do? 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'll do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide. (6-7)

From the lens of feminism, Miss Benare's emancipation specifically pertains to the struggle for rights, autonomy, and equality. In such societies, power structures often limit women's rights, opportunities, and agency, leading to various forms of discrimination, oppression, and inequality. Subha Tiwari in *Contemporary Indian Dramatists* declares:

The society has a very light parental and pampering sort of attitude when it comes to sexual offences of men. In case of women the iron rod gets hot and hotter. No punishment is actually enough for such a woman. There is no respite, no shade and no soothing cushion for a sinning woman. She must be stained and abandoned. Her femininity, her needs, her very existence must be ignored or rather destroyed. She must be cornered and brutally killed both in physical and psychological senses. This play is about the pathetic position of women in the male dominated Indian world. (35)

Mostly, gender identity primarily shapes the interconnected nature of various forms of oppression. In Indian patriarchal society, women are trampled down by the unwritten traditional costumes that prioritize male dominance and control. Kate Millett notes in *Sexual Politics* that "authoritarian governments appear to favor patriarchy" (158), which prevents women from thinking and walking freely in society. Men, who often hold authoritative positions, impose limitations on women's freedom to make choices and live life on their own terms. During the mock trial, Sukhmate purposefully questions Miss Benere's moral conduct; Ponkshe intentionally humiliates her by saying, "She runs after men too much" (45), and he controversially states, "To the public eye, she is unmarried" (45); Rokde provides false evidence by stating, "I went to—to Damel's house!" As night was falling. And there she was! Miss Benare" (53). "Usually, he always asks me in—into the room!" (55). Their statements, particularly Rohde's false accusation, provoke Miss Benare because they aim to insult her, paving the way for Miss Benare's reasonable response: "It reveals nothing of the sort!" Tomorrow, I may be seen in our principal's office. Does that mean my behavior is suspicious?" (55). The tendency of misogynistic society to pass judgment on women based on their moralistic grounds. It exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal societal attitudes towards women's behavior and choices.

Whenever women raise their voices for equal rights and inevitable justice, their voices and actions are silenced and marginalized by a male-dominated society. Vijay Tendulkar focuses on women's experiences and challenges traditional stereotypes. While arguing in the mock trial like other men, space and time are not given to Miss Benare to express her side of fairness. Whenever she tries to present her objections and valid reason during the trial, she is restrained by Kashikar, who says contempt of court or "Order! Miss Benare, self-control. Don't forget the value of self-control" (45). Mrs. Kashikar's chauvinistic husband, Mr. Kashikar, does not allow her to freely talk to everybody in the mock trial. E.V. Periyar satirized patriarchal chauvinism in the book *Why Were Women Enslaved?*, where he mentions:

In our country, we have several restrictions: once a woman becomes a man's wife, she has no freedom until her death; her husband can marry several women and live with them in her presence, and if she is in her husband's home while they have misunderstandings, the wife can only demand food from her husband, she doesn't have the right to compel him to satisfy her sexual desires. (4)

Furthermore, Periyar mentions, "It cannot be said that laws and religion are alone responsible, but because of women's acceptance, the situation has become entrenched...even women think that they are the property of men, meant to be under the control of men, and that they should not become the object of men's anger" (4). Even Mrs. Kashikar is willing to accept her husband's dominance over her in order to be an attentive and devoted wife. These incidents demonstrate how society silences women and their willingness to conform to patriarchal norms and costumes.

Sometimes, women are against other women because they feel envy towards other women's achievements, wealth, empowerment, relationships, or lifestyles, which can lead to negative attitudes and behaviours. Some women may unknowingly reinforce patriarchal norms and expectations by policing other women's behavior and upholding double standards.

To exemplify such a woman, Vijay Tendulkar intentionally presents the fictional character with her husband's surname, Mrs. Kashikar, instead of mentioning her name throughout the play. She is an uneducated married woman, bound by the tradition and orthodoxy of Indian society. She cannot digest the freedom of Miss Benare, a modern woman, to pursue a career and remain unmarried. Moreover, Mrs. Kashikar accuses Miss Benare, "Look how loud she laughs! How she sings, dances, cracks jokes! And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out!" (77). In *Why Were Women Enslaved?*, E.V. Periyar mentions women's internalized oppression:

Presently, women remain to be greater barriers to women's liberation than men. This is because even now women fail to think that they are capable of having complete freedom like men. They think that their physical characteristics are an indication that God has made them as the slaves of men. That is, every woman thinks that "men may live without women, but women cannot live without men. (63)

Under the disguise of male feminists, men pretend to challenge patriarchal norms, advocating for women's rights and promoting social, political, and economic equality between genders. In reality, they attempt to enslave women using traditional and customary norms, thereby restricting their freedom. E.V. Periyar emphasizes that through men's efforts, women cannot attain freedom for them because "men pretend to be highly concerned and make a great deal of pretense" (61). He also articulates, "The current movements for women's liberation being run by men not yield any benefit, but they also continue to strengthen the restrictions that enable the enslavement of women. Men's pretence of respecting women and working for their liberation is nothing but a conspiracy to cheat women" (61-62).

It is evident in the play that the mock trial is set against a woman, Miss Benare, by the male conspirators: Sukhatme, Karnik, and Ponkshe. During the prosecution, Sukhatme proceeds, "Woman is not fit for independence. . . That is the rule laid down for us by tradition. Abiding by this rule, I make a powerful plea. Na Miss Benare Swatantryamarhati is not fit for independence" (101). Ongoing accusations against Miss Benare not being married, Kashikar, a known social reformer, supports, "Our society should revive the old custom of child marriage. Marry off the girls before puberty. All this promiscuity will come to a full stop" (73-74). E.V. Periyar compares men antithetically with cruel beings and creatures in his work *Why Were Women Enslaved?*.

Will rats be liberated by the efforts of cats? Will goats and cocks be liberated by of foxes? Will the wealth of Indians increase because of the

British? Will the non-Brahmins attain equality by the efforts of the Brahmins? If one thinks over these questions, one can realize the truth. Even if liberation is somehow attained in these above cases, one can firmly believe that women will never attain liberation because of men. (62)

These scenarios depict how men hypocritically play an important role in ceasing feminist goals and enhancing systems of oppression and discrimination based on gender.

Conclusion:

Thus, the play *Silence! The Court in Session* powerfully touches upon the importance of education and empowerment for women. It suggests that education serves as a potent tool for challenging entrenched societal norms, gaining awareness of one's rights, and catalysing efforts towards achieving gender equality. Through the character of Miss Leela Benare and her journey towards self-liberation, Vijay Tendulkar underscores the importance of education for breaking the chains of traditional oppressive structures and empowering women to inherit their rights in a patriarchal Indian society. The play is emerging as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggle for women's emancipation and the indispensable role of education in paving the way towards a more equitable and just society.

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