

Mock Trial, Real Oppression: Unveiling the Hypocrisy of Society in Tendulkar's Play *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a compelling critique of the patriarchal and morally hypocritical structures that govern Indian society. Framed within the meta-theatrical device of a mock trial, the play scrutinizes the thin line between performance and reality, ultimately revealing how societal institutions often act as mechanisms of control and subjugation, especially for women. Through the character of Leela Benare, Tendulkar exposes the collective bias and moral policing inherent in middle-class morality. This paper examines how the mock trial transforms into a brutal real-life inquisition that reflects broader themes of gender inequality, performative justice, and social hypocrisy. Drawing on feminist theory, sociological critique, and dramatic analysis, this research positions Tendulkar's play as a timeless indictment of social injustice.

1. Introduction

Vijay Tendulkar occupies a pivotal place in the canon of Indian theatre. Known for his hard-hitting narratives and sociopolitical commentary, Tendulkar's works frequently confront the oppressive institutions of society. *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), originally written in Marathi as *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe*, is one such play that combines realism with symbolic drama. The play critiques the manner in which societal structures masquerade as moral and legal authorities, wielding power over the marginalized. It uses the format of a mock trial to expose the latent cruelty within civil society, particularly towards women who defy conventional roles.

Tendulkar's work is set against the backdrop of post-independence India, a time when traditional and modern values clashed violently in both urban and rural settings. The country had attained political freedom but still struggled to address deep-rooted social inequalities, particularly in the

areas of caste, class, and gender. *Silence!* explores these disparities with striking clarity, presenting a world where appearances are maintained at the expense of individual autonomy, especially that of women.

The core theme of the play, therefore, revolves around the moral policing of women's choices and behavior in a society that claims to be progressive but is, in fact, rooted in patriarchal values. Through the use of a mock trial, Tendulkar exposes how justice, in its supposed impartiality, is often manipulated by societal norms and individual prejudices. This paper explores the central themes of gender inequality, justice, and the role of the individual within the larger social structure, as they are represented in the mock trial.

2. The Play as a Societal Microcosm

The setting of *Silence!*—a group of amateur theatre artists rehearsing for a play—becomes a metaphorical courtroom where societal judgments are passed. The rehearsal, which begins as a playful endeavor, slowly morphs into a sinister inquisition of Miss Leela Benare's private life. The mock trial within the play allows the audience to experience how social norms, legal systems, and morality intersect, sometimes in ways that are unjust and deeply harmful. As Mukherjee (2003) argues, "The mock trial mirrors the real-world dynamics where social norms override legal justice" (p. 112). The use of a trial as a narrative device in *Silence!* invites the audience to consider how real-life systems of justice are often used to uphold biases and reinforce power dynamics.

3. Leela Benare: The Silenced Woman

Leela Benare is one of the most complex characters in Indian theatre. She is an embodiment of female autonomy and defiance against patriarchal expectations. Miss Benare is articulate, financially independent, and emotionally self-aware—qualities that unsettle the male characters and, by extension, society at large. The charges brought against her in the mock trial—her alleged abortion and relationship with a married man—are symbolic of the ways in which society criminalizes female independence and agency. As Spivak (1988) highlights, women are often denied the right to voice their experiences within dominant discourse (p. 287). Benare's eventual

silence, as the trial progresses, symbolizes not only her personal defeat but also the larger systemic forces at play.

Her personal history is also crucial to understanding her role in the play. Benare has suffered the loss of her parents, and the abandonment of her child by her lover, leaving her to face the harsh realities of society alone. These experiences shape her resistance to societal norms, as she rejects the traditional roles that are imposed upon women. Benare's profession as a teacher symbolizes enlightenment and knowledge, yet she is vilified by the same society that lauds male teachers and male intellectuals. As Gokhale (2001) notes, "Benare's character challenges not only the institution of marriage but also the notion of woman as the moral repository of culture" (p. 149). She represents an individual who refuses to be defined by societal expectations, and this refusal makes her a target.

The vilification of Leela Benare highlights the profound gender inequality that exists in society. In a world where women are often seen as the bearers of morality, any deviation from traditional roles—whether emotional, sexual, or professional—becomes a source of suspicion. Benare's autonomy, her refusal to conform, and her emotional expressiveness are all viewed as threats by the male characters, who embody traditional and patriarchal values.

4. Performative Justice and the Legal Farce

The legal format of the mock trial lends a false sense of legitimacy to what is essentially an act of character assassination. The prosecutor, Sukhatme, embodies the arrogance and moral superiority of those who assume the right to judge others. His approach is not based on reason or evidence but on personal prejudices and societal norms. The play's use of courtroom language—objections, witnesses, verdicts—masks the personal biases of the participants and presents them as neutral, objective truths. According to Bhalla (2004), "Tendulkar deconstructs the illusion of impartial justice by showing how easily the legal form can be appropriated for moral policing" (p. 85). This serves as a critique of how the legal system, which is supposed to be impartial, can easily be used to reinforce moral and gender biases.

The play also explores the issue of consent and legal subjectivity. Benare is never given a fair chance to defend herself in the mock trial. Her emotional outbursts are interpreted not as valid expressions of distress but as hysterical outbursts, thus reinforcing the stereotype of the emotional, irrational woman. The legal proceedings, which should ideally uphold the principle of justice, serve instead as a vehicle for the men to assert their dominance and to silence the voice of the woman at the center of the trial. As Menon (2004) argues, "The legal system often fails to protect those who do not conform to normative frameworks of behavior" (p. 89). Benare's treatment reflects how the legal system can, at times, serve the interests of the powerful rather than ensuring justice for all.

5. Patriarchal Constructs and Hypocrisy

The male characters in the play—Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Karnik, and others—represent various forms of patriarchal dominance. They vacillate between flirtation and condemnation, camaraderie and cruelty. Their treatment of Benare highlights the deeply ingrained fears they have about female independence. These men are the enforcers of societal norms, and their attitudes toward Benare reveal the underlying hypocrisy of the moral system they defend. As Nabar (1995) notes, "The vilification of Benare is not based on her actions but on her refusal to conform to expected gender roles" (p. 133).

One of the key figures in the play is Professor Damle, the unseen father of Benare's unborn child. His presence looms large over the trial, but he remains untouched by the moral judgments passed on Benare. Damle, as the father of the child, would be equally responsible for the situation, yet he escapes scrutiny while Benare is subjected to public shaming. This represents the broader social tendency to overlook male transgressions while punishing women for their perceived failings. As Chakravarti (2003) states, "Women are judged not by what they do but by who they are in relation to men—wives, daughters, or mistresses" (p. 45).

6. Symbolism of Silence

The title of the play, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, is deeply ironic. While the command "Silence!" appears to demand order in court, it symbolizes the enforced silence of those whose voices do not conform to societal expectations. In this sense, the play critiques the way in which dissenting voices, particularly those of women, are silenced in the name of law and order. Benare's

ultimate silence is a powerful statement about the limitations of justice, which, in this case, fails to protect her or to acknowledge her humanity. As Dharwadker (2005) suggests, "Benare's silence is an indictment of the entire socio-legal apparatus that claims to protect but actually persecutes" (p. 208).

Benare's silence at the end of the play is not simply the surrender of an individual but a reflection of the systematic silencing of all those who challenge societal norms. Her final act of silence is a protest—a refusal to engage in a system that has already decided her fate. In this, she takes on the role of a tragic hero, much like Antigone, who challenges the laws of men in order to follow her own moral compass.

7. The Meta-Theatrical Device

Tendulkar's use of meta-theatre is central to the play's impact. The rehearsal of a play within a play allows the audience to see the absurdity of the mock trial, while also drawing attention to the performative nature of justice. The trial is a performance, but so too is the way society constructs and enforces norms. By drawing attention to the artificiality of the trial, Tendulkar encourages the audience to question the authenticity of the judgments passed by society. This technique also aligns with Brechtian theatre, which aims to alienate the audience and provoke critical thought.

Meta-theatre serves a feminist function by exposing the politics of representation. The character of Benare is not just a passive victim of her circumstances; she is a woman who actively challenges the social norms that seek to define her. The play within a play technique underscores the idea that reality is always mediated by performance—whether on the stage or in society.

8. Contemporary Resonance

Over fifty years after its debut, *Silence! The Court is in Session* remains relevant in contemporary society. Issues of gender inequality, moral policing, and societal hypocrisy continue to plague modern India and many other parts of the world. The play's exploration of female autonomy and the silencing of women in the name of justice resonates with ongoing debates about women's

rights, reproductive rights, and the persistence of patriarchal structures. Moreover, the play's critical stance on the legal system's failure to deliver true justice remains a timely commentary on the current state of legal and social institutions.

In conclusion, *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a profound critique of the hypocrisy that permeates both the legal system and societal norms. Through the use of the mock trial, Tendulkar exposes the power dynamics at play, highlighting how women's voices are often suppressed in the name of justice. Leela Benare's struggle is emblematic of the broader fight for gender equality and individual autonomy, and her silence at the end of the play serves as a powerful reminder of the ways in which oppressive systems often silence dissent.

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