

**LAW AND CUSTOMARY PRACTICES IN LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS: A CRITICAL
STUDY OF MOCK-TRIAL IN *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION* BY VIJAY
TENDULKAR**

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Received: 09 Mar 2019

Accepted: 11 Apr 2019

Published: 30 Apr 2019

ABSTRACT

With the production of Silence! The Court is in Session in 1967, Tendulkar created a stir in the literary society. He was considered a rebel since he challenged the established norms of a fundamentally orthodox society. Miss Leela Benare, the central character of the play and quite different from other characters, is very easily trapped in the cunning plot which is very cleverly set by her co-actors. Miss Benare's personal life is exposed through the play within the play, her illicit affair with Professor Damle, a married man with a family, who got her pregnant. She is accused with the crime of infanticide which ultimately turns into the verdict at the conclusion as the roots of contemporary Indian society being deeply entrenched in the orthodox mindset which cannot allow a child to be born out of wedlock. The paper discusses the hypocrisy of the orthodox society and its dualities which are the fundamentals of such a kind of a society.

KEYWORDS: *Mock-Trial, Law and Customary Practices, Leela Benare and Tendulkar*

INTRODUCTION

Vijay Tendulkar rose as a rebellious voice with the production of *Silence! The Court is in Session (Shantata! Court ChaluAhe)* in 1967. The drama presents a metaphorical trial of a school teacher, the protagonist, Miss Leela Benare. Her personal life has made public through the cunning mock-trial in which she is alleged with infanticide and having illicit relations with a married man, Professor Damle. Other characters in the play, Mr Gopal Ponshe, Mr Karnik Rokde, Samant, Mr Sukhatme, Mr Kashikar and his wife Mrs Kashikar, all turn up against Miss Benare accusing and mocking her in the name of good moral conduct and basic human decency.

Analysis

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, the theatre group is the representative of the middle-class and its orthodox ideology. The characters they play, the dialogues they speak, the way they carry themselves are a way to vent out their repressed feelings and desires as is portrayed in the drama through play within the play technique used by the dramatist, Vijay Tendulkar. Miss Leela Benare, being the only exception in the play, possesses a natural charm towards life, living it the way as she likes it and ignoring the established orthodox order. She is made the scapegoat because of her being different to others, she is made the victim of the ruthless game planned wickedly by her fellow co-actors. This ruthless game is significantly set in the form of a mock-trial, exposing the personal life of Miss Leela Benare, her illicit love affair with Professor Damle, a family man, and getting impregnated by him. The absence of Professor Damle from the trial shows his

complete withdrawal from the responsibility, both social and moral, of the situation in which he has landed Leela into. He is summoned during the trial only as a witness whereas Miss Leela Benare is the prime accused as the mother of his illegitimate child.

Ponkshe: Miss Leela Benare, you have been arrested on the suspicion of a crime of an extremely grave nature, and brought as a prisoner before the bar of this court.

Kashikar: Prisoner Miss Benare, under the Section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code, you have been accused of the crime of infanticide. Are you guilty or not guilty of the aforementioned crime? (74)

The sadistic bent of mind of other characters such as Sukhatme, Mr and Mrs Kashikar, Ponkshe, Karnik and Rokde is revealed during the mock-trial. Through the portrayal of characters in the play, Vijay Tendulkar has scrutinized deep into their psyches to such an extent that it reveals their hidden sense of failure looming over their lives – the unskillfulness of Sukhatme as a lawyer, the barrenness couple Mr and Mrs Kashikar, the non-achievement of Ponkshe's dream to become a scientist, the useless efforts of Karnik to become successful actor and the inaptitude of Rokde to accomplish himself as an adult and become an independent individual. The simpleton figure of the villager Samant stands in complete contrast to those of the urbane character. Miss Leela Benare's long soliloquy in her defense in the mock-trial scene has become very popular in Marathi theatre just like that of Portia's Quality of Mercy soliloquy in *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare. But Tendulkar leaves the audiences/readers in speculation whether Leela delivers the soliloquy at all or she has remained silent, swallowing up whatever she has to say, as she is forced to do by her tyrants. It can be seen several times during the mock-trial that her protestations are neglected by the judge's cry of 'Silent' and the banging of gavel time and again. Leela's speech reminds us of Ibsen's famous heroine Nora's postulation of independence but lacks the conviction and protest which is the essence of Nora's speech. Her speech is more of a clarification to self rather than an attack on the hypocrisy of the society. It is reflective of the powerlessness of females in our society.

The mode of drama adopted by Vijay Tendulkar is naturalistic. The technique of play within a play adds an extra dimension to the understanding of the play where the line between reality and illusion is blurred. Samant's reading from a sensational and fictitious novel coming very close to the real life situation is one such instance. The hurting of Miss Benare's finger at the very beginning when she enters the hall is symbolic of her impending and inevitable persecution by her co-actors. This metaphorically represents that there is no escape left for her in which she finds herself in her real life. Also, there is a green cloth parrot which she carries and the sad lullaby that she sings many times and again. Both these have symbolic significance in the denouement of the play.

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

'Oh, my dear friend, what shall I say?

Someone has stolen my nest away.'

Sparrow, sparrow, poor little sparrow...

'Oh, brother crow, oh, brother crow,

Were you there? Did you see it go?'

'No, I don't know. I didn't see.

What are your troubles to do with me?'

O sparrow, sparrow, poor little sparrow. (act three)

CONCLUSIONS

Silence! The Court is in Session is one of the first significant Indian play which focuses on the woman as a protagonist and also a victim. The play not only locates the heroine at the receiving end but also at a certain point of conflict with her tormenters where she threatens her executors or the power in absentia. The dramatic strategy used by Tendulkar is such that Miss Leela Benare's persecutors are as powerless as she is and their deeds to put her down are symbolic of striving towards power rather than rendering her powerless. Tendulkar exposes the powerlessness of each one of them individually who eventually gang up together to humiliate Leela, which on the other hand exposes their own powerlessness and their desperation to accumulate power. The word 'mock' in itself therefore in itself is a pun, which implies both the unreal trial and the fun that is made of Miss Leela Benare, the protagonist of the play, during her trial.

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