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# Gendered Justice in Vijay Tendulkar's Silence! The Court is in Session

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**Abstract:**
The statement of Simone de Beauvoir, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 295), underscores the influence of society in conditioning gender roles. Women who challenge socially prescribed gender roles are reprimanded not only by orthodox society but also by individuals who identify themselves as progressive intellectuals. Vijay Tendulkar, through his drama, Silence! The Court is in Session, critiques the hypocrisy of progressive intellectuals for their oppressive attitude towards women. The play also represents the problems of independent women in exercising their rights not only in misogynistic orthodox societies but also in a so-called informed and politically correct crowd. This study examines the contradiction between progressive social identity and the collective policing of female autonomy, with reference to the contrasting positions of Leela Benare, Mrs Kashikar, and the male members of the association in this drama.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Women's autonomy, Gender discrimination, Vijay Tendulkar

## The Contradictions of Social Progressivism

The drama vividly depicts the stark reality of victims and perpetrators coexisting in *Silence! The Court is in Session*. All the characters belong to the same organisation, the 'Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association (SMTPA),' which is committed to social causes. Members of this association pretend to be progressive despite their hypocrisy and male chauvinism.

Like any other play, Vijay Tendulkar drew inspiration from a real incident to write this drama: some of his colleagues, while preparing a drama in Vile Parle, Bombay, were engrossed in gossip about a co-actor in her absence. The gruesome projection of that lady, especially about her extramarital affair, which was baseless, was made as fodder for that gossip. As Vijay Tendulkar, a critic of the hypocrisy between ideals and practices of human beings, which was very evident in his past dramas like *Ghasiram Kotwal, Gidade,* and *Sakharam Binder,* conceived the idea of writing *Silence! The Court is in Session* was drawn from that situation.

Many of his close associates requested him to refrain from staging that drama since it could hurt the sentiments of his fraternity, i.e., playwrights and actors. However, Vijay Tendulkar did not pay heed to these requests. His uncompromising attitude brought him into many controversies earlier too while staging Ghasiram Kotwal, as he challenged historical and social beliefs as a "nihilistic metaphysician" (Deshpande

19). Despite the subsequent threats, Tendulkar never considered withdrawing the drama. As Prakash (207) observes, "Tendulkar's artistic objectivity neither vilifies nor glorifies any one of the parties in question." It applies to every society he represents in his writings, whether Dalits, Tribals, or Brahmins. Therefore, Tendulkar was subjected to physical assaults by Brahmins as well as Dalits.

Similarly, in the theatrical satire *Silence! The Court is in Session,* in which Tendulkar *"searchingly" analyses "woman's plight in a male-dominated society" (Gupta 183),* shedding light upon the hypocrisy of his own colleagues "as a rebel against the established values of a fundamentally orthodox society" (Kaushal 212). Explaining his transformation, Deosthale (141) observes that Tendulkar is "an uncompromising Marxist who refuses to slide into ideological and intellectual disintegration and pays the price in terms of absolute isolation in the ensuing emotional turmoil."

**The Institution of Marriage**

Due to gender bias, the role of women has been undermined throughout the ages. Despite innumerable struggles, women continue to face structural inequalities in achieving socioeconomic parity with men. Women's role is reduced to marrying a man and being a good housewife, emphasising marriage alone as an irrevocable and respectable destiny for women. This phenomenon is categorically projected in the drama through characters like Leela Benare and Mrs Kashikar.

The protagonist, Leela Benare, is presented as a spirited schoolteacher with impeccable professional credentials. She exemplifies the ideals Simone de Beauvoir explains (83): "The true problem for woman is to reject these flights from reality and seek self-fulfilment in transcendence." However, she faces social condemnation for being self-dependent and outspoken, and for rejecting "false modesty and dignity." Simone de Beauvoir (734) also comments that "We must not believe, certainly, that a change in woman's economic condition alone is enough to transform her, though this factor has been and remains the basic factor in her evolution; but until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural, and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new cannot appear. "

The other character, Mrs Kashikar, though she masquerades as a progressive woman, remains constrained by internalised patriarchal values. Mrs Kashikar is burdened with long lists of prohibitions and restrictions imposed by her husband. Her position is subordinated by her husband's frequent stern lectures with masculine undertones. Despite her vulnerable position, she resorts to a humiliating and gender-biased interrogation of Leela Benare. While casting aspersions on Benare's character for not being married, she says, "What else? That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care less about responsibility! Let me tell you — in my time, even if a girl was snub-nosed, sallow, hunchbacked, or anything whatever, she — could — still — get — married! It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how pro-miscuity has spread throughout our society." (54). She eventually divulges Leela Benare's alleged extramarital relationship with Professor Damle. The male character, Ponkshe, further presents his testimony as part of the mock trial by degrading her moral character by claiming that she approached and pressured him to marry her by confessing her pregnancy with Professor Damle.

**The Mock Trial: Patriarchy, Moral Policing and the Silencing of Women**

Since these characters cannot openly express their prejudices and hostility as progressive thinkers, they stage a mock trial under the pretext of educating Samant about court proceedings. However, they draw a careful divide by keeping the protagonist, Leela Benare, out of the league.
The mock trial, which is intended to help Samant understand court proceedings, turns out to be cruel as it ends up attacking the personal life of Leela Benare. Confident, self-reliant Leela Benare is "dumbfounded when she is abruptly charged with infanticide" (Chatterjee 204) under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code. With this, the members of the association pry into Ms Leela Benare's personal life, breaking her self-esteem. The attitude of society, irrespective of their progressive pretences, becomes instantly cynical when it comes to an independent, carefree, and unmarried woman. Consequently, the members collectively turn against Leela Benare, using the mock trial to condemn her personal life. They mockingly level charges against her for an extramarital affair with Professor Damle, the pregnancy resulting from the relationship and its subsequent termination. She is reluctantly roped into the proceedings. Sukhatme, the lawyer playing the same role in the play, prompts the witnesses to say more about Ms Benare's affair with Professor Damle. Though it begins with a comic tone, it ends awkwardly. Samant, who is not privy to her personal life, testifies about Benare's pleas to Professor Damle to marry her.

In his capacity as judge in the mock trial, Kashikar invokes Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code in the proceedings against Benare, accusing her of infanticide. "*Benare looks stunned. All are silent for the moment. The atmosphere is extraordinarily sombre*." (Tendulkar 24). The other characters derive enormous entertainment by sharing masala pans and beedis. Though Benare pretends to be "lighthearted" to create the right courtroom environment, she faces psychological turmoil because of an uncharitable plot conceived by her co-actors.

Kashikar, who tries to sound like a public intellectual, treats the fictitious but magnified charges against Benare as a matter of great social significance. Characters mask their vulgarity behind courtroom decorum as a form of mockery. The mock trial begins in a sarcastic tone where Sukhatme requests: "Milord, in the interests of the smooth functioning of the matter before the court, I beseech the court for an adjournment of a quarter minute in the beginning, so that all present may spit out the *pan* in their mouths." (Tendulkar 26)

The mock trial serves as a weaponised tool to degrade Leela Benare. Her social dignity is undermined for not adhering to the prescribed social norms of being a married woman, lacking femininity in her behaviour, and having dented morality due to her relationship with Professor Damle despite her professional and financial independence. Even in the presumed relationship between Leela Benare and Prof. Damle, Damle, who impregnates her, escapes the moral scrutiny of other characters.
Mrs Kashikar's character emphasises that patriarchal values are not restricted to males; they can be internalised in females as well, who can be with males in subjugating women and collective aggression.

**Intellectual Hypocrisy**

Mr Kashikar projects himself as a progressive intellectual but excessively exercises patriarchal authority over his wife. He takes the opportunity of the mock trial to encourage other characters to accuse Leela Benare of adultery, pregnancy, and infanticide. His authoritarian attitude is also evident in his treatment of Balu Rokde; in the words of Ms Leela Benare, "They educated him. Made him toil away. Made a slave

out of him" (Tendulkar 6). This is also confirmed in his conversation with Balu, when he demands whether he has brought all the necessary costumes for the trial, during which "Rokde grows increasingly miserable and irritated."

The other character, Professor Damle, is portrayed as “someone who prides himself on his book learning. But when there's a real-life problem, away he runs! Hides his head” (Tendulkar 6). This character represents the self-proclaimed progressive thinkers who cannot make viable decisions in real-life situations. While everyone in the play subjects Leela Benare's moral character to scrutiny for her alleged involvement, they ignore Professor Damle's role. Through this satirical play, Tendulkar conveys that collective judgment of gender is asymmetrical and biased against women.

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