

**REDRESSING THE GENDER STEREOTYPES AND PREDICAMENTS
THROUGH THE ART OF PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF VIJAY TENDULKAR'S
SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION AND CARYL CHURCHILL'S THE SKRIKER**

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Abstract

This paper aims at throwing light on the representation of gender politics and violence in Tendulkar's Silence! The Court is in Session and Churchill's The Skriker. Theatre as a powerful dynamic medium generates a space for social interaction by bringing socio cultural predicaments on stage. Tendulkar delineates socio-political predicament and gender concerns in his plays. His Silence! The Court is in Session sheds light on the subjugation of women's voice in male oriented society. Caryl Churchill, on the other hand, is a feminist critique of capitalism and materialistic feminism. She in The Skriker unpacks the predicaments of materialistic society by introducing the audience to the dystopic world, hunted by petrified fairies. Both playwrights demystify the stigmatized representation of women from feminist perspectives. These plays reflect the ways societal forces subjugate the voices of women in the society, which is dominated by phallogocentric and capitalistic taboos.

Keywords: Gender politics, subjugation, capitalism, feminism, representation

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A Theatre is a mirror of a society. Theatre embodies society through a series of powerful theatrical explosions. Vijay Tendulkar is one of the prolific Indian playwrights having written many full-length plays and twenty four one act plays. His plays are the results of real life incidents that entail socio-political events which throw light on the burning reality of the period. According to Dharan "he has dwelt on the alienation of the modern individual, satirized contemporary politics, forcefully depicted social and individual tensions, portrayed with fines the complexities of human character, and vigorously exploited man-women relationship in several of his works". (Dharan xi). Caryl Churchill is one of the leading feminist dramatists of Britain, has written extensively about the predicaments of women. As dramatist, she often advocates socialism and lashes out capitalism and its tenants, which, she considers oppress women. She also brought new changes in theatre to subvert prevalent phallocentric power apparatuses. Her *The Skriker* brings audience to a dystopic world to draw a picture of the distorted and fragmented women that also sheds light on the multiple identities of women in postmodernism.

Silence! The Court is in session is one of Tendulkar's masterpieces. It portrays the ordeal of an educated woman, which she experiences as her social intercourse goes against the norms of established tradition. Tendulkar treats his characters with understanding and embodies them against the interest of imposed rules of society, which is patriarchal in nature. This play projects the psyche of the society and double standards while dealing with subjects of women. The dramatist introduces a play within the play to explore the attitude of patriarchal society which denies freedom of choice to women in the matter of sex, and profession. Benar, leading women

character in the play protests and the tone of empowerment are exemplified as she asks “Who are those people to say what I can or cant 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” (Tendulkar 5). Benare criticises and accuses all men as hypocrites whose focus is only on the female body, not the agonised heart of women. She pinpoints that “ 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”(74). She then shares her loving experience at different phases of her life and her utterance tells us that she has had very bad experiences with men and she observes when she starts talking about Damle “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” (75). Megha Trivedi observes that:

Benere is a prey of male chauvinism; she is used simply to gratify the quench for bodily thirst and deserted at the end to her own destiny. Man has all the rights to be sinful in the society. He can be harsh, notorious and innocent too. All the rights are reserved especially for men. On the other hand, a woman must be deserted, abandoned, ignored, thrown away and should be tainted for her sins. There is no escape for her in our society. She must be brutally destroyed for her actions both physically and mentally. (Megha)

The concept of the body has been conceptualised and deliberated in different literary and non literary works. This deliberation started from the thought that women being considered biologically different, subsequently feminists started deconstructing and casting out the existing assumptions on women in the society. With the publication of *The Second Sex*, theorising of female body got a new dimension, Beauvoir recognises that “ to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world”(qtd in Lennon, Kathleen).

Arundhati Banerje opines that:

Banare's defence of herself against the onslaughts of the upholders of social norms in a long soliloquy, has become famous in the history of contemporary Marathi theatre. It is important to note here that Tendulkar leaves us in doubt as to whether or not Benere, at all, delivers the soliloquy, thus suggesting that, in all probability, what she has to say for herself is swallowed up by the silence imposed upon her by the authorities. In fact, during the court proceedings, on several occasions, her objections and protestations are drowned by the judge's cry of silence and banging of the gavel" (qtd in Dharan 40)

Mrs Kashikar is another leading female character in *Silence! The court is in session*. She is childless and adhered to the norms of tradition, she is not rebellious in the play as Benare. The institution of marriage has curtailed women doing certain things which are against the prevailing social decorum. Kalindi Deshpande observes in an article entitled *Capitulation to Conservatism: Vijay Tendulkar's Women Characters* that "An insightful dramatist like Tendulkar dips into the deeper recesses of the human mind and comments on men-women relationship in his plays, on its deeply struck by his extraordinary sensitivity as a dramatist...He absorbs the nuances and complexities of human relationships. His experience leads him to unmitigated mental disturbance and uneasiness". (Madge 91)

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Vijay Tendulkar satirises double standard of society towards women. This play also mocks at the judicial system of the country, but the underlying subject of the play points to patriarchal approach to certain issues pertained to women. Benare is self reliant, her boldness and tone of empowerment is visible in the play. She says " I Leela Benare, a living woman, I say it from my own experience. Life is not meant for anyone else. It's your own life. It must be. It is a very, very important thing. Every moment, every bit of it is precious" (Tendulkar 8). The

accusation and trials of the court were held in absence of Prof Damle. Veena Das observes in *Women Characters in the plays of Tendulkar* that:

It is important here to note that these charges became verbalized only in the absence of Prof. Damle. If he were present, the typical backbiting attitude of the self righteous Indian male would not have helped reveal the truth. Miss Benare was thrown into the dock and there she remained trying to joke herself out of it, but trapped too murderously by the male vultures around her. Witness after witness charges upon charges we heaped upon her. The defence lawyer was so frightened that he only asked for a little mercy on her behalf. Miss Benare who is on the offensive at the beginning found herself trapped at the close of the play. (Das 10)

Discourse on motherhood in the plays is another gender politics that carries multiple meaning in the play. The view on motherhood is male oriented in *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Regarding this Sukhathe comments that:

Miss Leela Benere. Is trul dreadful? The woman who is an accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood which is purer than heavens itself. For that, any punishment, however great, that the law may give he, will be too mild by far. The character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality...Her conduct has blackened all social and moral values...unmarried motherhood. Motherhood without marriage has always been considered a very great sin by our religion and our traditions...No allowance must be made because the accused is a woman. Women bear the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. Na stri swatantryamarhati. Women are not fit for independence. That is the role laid down for us by tradition. Abidingby this rule. I make a powerful plea. Na Miss Benere swatantryamarhati. Miss Benare is not fit for independence (Tendulkar 70-71)

British feminist theatre of the 1970s re radicalised the theatrical norms of stagecraft to subvert the existing power structure. The Feminist movement of 1960s and 70s affected all spheres of life. The supernatural Skriker in the play try to entice two women with a promise to meet their material desire. Though the play links with the fairy logic in unrealistic ways, it, in fact, sheds light on some burning realities of the period. The play sets in both Britain and a mythical underworld. The three leading characters in the plays are the Skriker, a damaged fairy and two women, Josie and Lily. At the outset of the play, Josie is in a mental asylum for murdering her infant daughter. She is called on by her pregnant friend/ Sister Lily. The Skriker metamorphoses the roles to assume different roles to lure and take these two women into underworld.

There is a contradiction in the representation of two women in the play. Josie is embodied as a bad sister as she has been confined in a mental asylum after murdering her new born baby and Lily is represented as a good sister, but both were hunted by the Skriker who longs for their fertility. Another binary opposition can be found in its portrayal of two worlds: the ancient mythological world and the modern world. Both in fact, are drowned in the materialist interest of the world. The Skriker with endowed super natural power shape shifts through a number of disguises to lure these two women and Skriker now wants to the baby of Lily. "The Skriker itself is a figure of incredible malice and need, stalking the young women, crying for attention, transporting them across time and space without their volition, assaulting them with language at once seductive, strange, terrible and haunting."(Aston 48) Skriker's mission was successful with Josie, Skriker took her to the underworld where she encounters with mythological characters. The Skriker is the queen in hell, where Josie was offered a glass of wine. She drinks it although she was warned by an unidentified girl

Don't eat. It is twigs and beetles and a dead body

Don't eat or you will never get back...(270)

Nagy has given theological interpretation to *The Skriker*. She opines that :

Everyone who is weak enough to get in touch with a fairy comes to grief Sodo Josie and Lily. However, it would be far too easy and unjust to blame all the miseries on the Skriker and her company. They may appear as beautiful, kind and amiable beings to Josie and Lily but ultimately the choice is whether the sisters should embrace them or reject them. They fail to make the right choice and they fail (qtd Cunnally 7).

The spatial dislocation and fear are encapsulated in fragmented languages of the play. The play can also be read as a critique against materialism. It is obvious as Lily starts vomiting coins, she could not speak as she produces flow of money. The female body turns to be a money making machine here. "Churchill seemed to be asking, the catastrophic global consequences of the ever-expanding reach of untrammelled greed" (Aston 47). Candice Amich opines that:

Through the shape shifting figure of the Skriker, who commands space and time in a manner theatre calls fluidity of multinational capital, Churchill examines the relationship between time-space compression and the fragmented subjectivities of two women, Josie and Lily. As the Skriker invades their bodies, instantaneously transporting them through space and time, the simultaneously pleasurable and terrifying breakdown of interiority that accompanies temporal and spatial dislocation in our era of late capitalism is simulated on stage(394).

Unlike Tendulkar's play, *The Skriker* talks motherhood from a different dimension. Josie has been confined because she has murdered her newly born infant. This play contradicts her character with Lily. Josie has succumbed to the materialistic temptation and she is a victim of the hallucination of materialistic life, promised by the capitalist system. Lily is a progressive thinker in the play. In the play, she represents as a pregnant woman and her character contrasts with Josie's character. Skriker's hankering to get hold of Lily's baby unpacks her desperate feeling for motherhood. Jung Bamett describes the mother archetype as having

maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful insight or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. On the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate (qtd Cunnally 29).

In a nutshell, it is apparent that the politics of gender and violence have been illustrated with an aim to liberate women from the yoke of societal and political taboos. Tendulkar castigates the exploitative and double standard of society in handling sensitive gender issues while Caryl Churchill pinpoints the victimisation of women due to the hallucination created by materialistic culture. *Top Girls* of Churchill also talks about materialist culture, women are victimised due to an illusion that pretends to promise a lot of things but nothing concrete result being produced. Both Tendulkar and Caryl Churchill sheds light on the marginalisation of women in the name tradition and societal norms. Violence is often camouflaged in camaraderie in both plays. Two leading female characters in the play bring out predicaments and concerns that they encounter. Churchill seems to suggest symbolically that capitalist system made these women get entrapped as it gives false promises of individual success. The urge of luxurious life makes them greedy. Susannah Clapp observes that “*The Skriker* reclaims what have been thought as “women’s issues” for humanity. Motherhood may, after all, also affect men. Churchill uses a female voice to express a skewed world. And what better time to stage this? We are in an era of theatrical dystopias”. Both plays assert that women often fall prey due to the socio cultural order.

The character Banare is very assertive and she is neither ashamed nor submissive but Churchill’s characters are the victims of time and system. Exploitative nature of capitalism entraps women more than men as it follows and centres its

principles on phallogocentric viewpoints. We get a negative image of a mother at the beginning of the play *The Skriker*, Josie has been confined in a mental asylum as she killed a newborn baby, Lily is a progressive thinker in the play, contrast to Josie. Banare assertiveness challenges the norms of established tradition. Both plays claim that male oriented society and tradition are oppressive forces, which curtails women to manifest their freedom for the sake of the phallogocentric social system.

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