

Leela Benare in Vijay Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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Abstract : *Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), a well-known name in the history of Indian Literature and screen writings, raised Indian drama to the new heights with his innovations and touching themes. Though his living characters are from the society one grows in yet they exhibit a strange kind of uniqueness. He presents contrastive personalities. One such character is Leela Benare from his famous play Silence! The Court is in Session. She is shown as an independent, unmarried woman at the age of about thirty-four who falls in the trap of patriarchal society. She tries to live her life happily by finding joys in little things of life but doesn't know in her innocence that jealous brutes of this society can easily and tactfully crush her lively life. She is shown as an accused who commits sin of infanticide, becomes mother out of wedlock and is considered arrogant by male Gods of the society. This paper aims at bringing to surface various aspects of Benare's inspiring as well as shattered personality.*

Keywords: *Woman, exploitation, infanticide, unmarried mother, adorable teacher, court, accused, victim.*

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Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (6 January 1928- 19 May 2008), a very renowned name in Indian Literature, Indian Screenplay, and Indian Journalism for contributing a voluminous oeuvre during a momentous span of over five decades, wrote primarily in Marathi and was translated in English. He used his words of wisdom to reveal exploitation in the social set up and in limning real life like characters. During an interview conducted by *Passion for Cinema* in 2006 he said:

“I have not written about hypothetical pain or created an imaginary world of sorrow. I am from a middle-class family and I have seen the brutal ways of life by keeping my eyes open. My work has come from within me, as an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live. If they want to entertain and make merry, fine go ahead, but I can't do it, I have to speak the truth.”¹

Vijay Tendulkar, winner of prestigious awards like Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1970), National Film Award for Best Screenplay (1977), Filmfare Best Screenplay Awards for the years 1981 and 1983, Filmfare Best Story Award 1981, Padam Bhushan (1984) and many more honours, penned two novels, two short story anthologies, more than thirty plays and around fifteen screenplays. Among his various writings, *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *Sakharam Binder* (1972) and *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) are the plays which make him sparkle in the galaxy of outstanding playwrights. He portrayed realistic characters, their sufferings, their pains, their aspirations, their desires, their needs, their relations and many more aspects of a social beings' personality. Especially, depiction of women from different strata of society casts vital impact on audience.

“His female characters are mainly from the lower and middle classes: housewives, teachers, mistresses, daughters, film extras, slaves, and servants.”²

One such character which is discussed in the present paper is Leela Benare from the play *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Rather than being a submissive, shy, sincere and an ordinary conventional Indian woman, she imbibes in herself qualities of various female characters presented in the literature so far and of characters who can be seen painted anywhere on the social canvas. Sometimes she seems to be like Elphaba from *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995) by Gregory Maguire who expresses her opinions, and stands up for what she

thinks is right. While at other moments she comes up like Paulo Coelho's Mata Hari from *The Spy* whose only crime was being an independent and emancipated woman in a male-dominated society. She is around Thirty-Four years old kind hearted, unmarried teacher and actress. She is a marvelous woman who expects marvels to eventuate in her life.

Little happenings in the surroundings make her feel wonderful. She is always exhilarated on meeting some pure hearted person or visiting a new place or doing something different from routine. She likes old hall of the place where she goes to take part in the play. Maybe she finds it different from the city's polished places with fake appearances. She is there to play her role in The Sonar Moti Tenement(Bombay) Progressive Association's Mock Lawcourt whose Prime Objective is to spread enlightenment. She is well aware of the qualities of her co-actors. According to her Mr. Kashikar takes all steps with some purpose in mind, Mrs. Kashikar, who is an excellent housewife, is called by her 'Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle'³. She sees Balu Rokde as a sort of slave to Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar whom they give shelter. Sukhatme for her is an expert in Law, who does wonders during performance, and Ponshe is a science student, an intellectual, and a book worm. And most importantly Prof. Damley, an erudite person is a false-God, for whom body is more important.

To analyse her personality, technique of contrast should be used. There is no doubt in being her different from other characters. In fact, clashing traits are found in her own character also. She is a grown-up child. Her cute joys bring to the fore babe who is still lingering in her. She likes toys. She is elated at the sight of green parrot in Samant's hands. Moreover, she loves to play pranks so she hides herself behind the door to scare her troupe members with 'Boo'⁴. Sukhatme thinks she is childish and doesn't want to grow and same are the views of others in the group. She is in the habit of keeping one fingertip between her lips. She walks at very lively pace. To leave others behind while on the way to the performance hall makes her happy. Maybe she likes Samant whom she sees as a reliable companion, "Let's leave everyone behind, I thought, and go somewhere far, far away—with you!"⁵ She has got very inquisitive mind. Indirectly, she enquires whether Samant is married or not. Moreover, she is in the habit of teasing and mimicking like kids. She tries to irritate Ponshe by saying, "Hmm. Once there was a Hmm! And he knew a girl called Erhmm!"⁶ "Then Ponshe says, "Stop it, Benare! Don't be childish."⁷ Also, Sukhatme asks her to be serious to make Samant understand how court works, otherwise the game will become really childish.

She likes people who are full of zest to enjoy life. In her thirties she still considers herself young. Furthermore, she is a very straightforward woman and

expresses her feelings openly. She doesn't feel hesitation in standing near persons of opposite sex. She makes Samant feel embarrassed as she stands very near to him and asks, "Did you see the magic-from very near?"⁸

Her punctuality, dedication, and hard work make her the most desired teacher but she doesn't like to be called a typical school marm. She loves children more than adults. "At least they don't have that blind pride of thinking they know everything. There's no nonsense stuffed in their heads. They don't scratch you till you bleed, then run away like cowards."⁹

She assures,

"In school when the first bell rings, my foot's already on the threshold. I haven't heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my teaching. I'm *never* behindhand with my lessons! Exercises corrected on time, too! Not a bit of room for disapproval- I don't give an inch of it to any one!"¹⁰

She is very disciplined, intelligent, watchful and active. She is as adorable a teacher as Miss Jennifer Honey in *Matilda* (1988) by Roald Dahl. This is the cause of another people's envy towards her and that's why people try to expose her personal matters to lower her dignity.

"In class, I never sit when teaching. That's how I keep my eye on the whole class. No one has a chance to play up. My class is scared stiff of me! And they adore me, too. My children will do anything for me. For I'd give the last drop of my blood to teach them. (In a different tone). That's why people are jealous. Specially other teachers and the management."¹¹

She doesn't like to waste time, not even a half second. She wants to do every act according to norms. At this age she is exact opposite of what she was in her childhood. Earlier she was quiet like Shakespeare's Celia in *As You Like It* (written-1599, published-1623) and now owing to too much talkativeness she resembles Rosalind from the same play.

She is very playful, lively and cheerful character, knows about the preciousness of time, wants to keep positive attitude all the time, and lives life according to her own philosophy,

“I say it-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’s a very, very important thing. Every moment, every bit of it is precious-”¹²

Precisely, she can be called a **modern woman** who doesn’t allow others to take decisions for her. She wants to write the story of her life with her own hands but destiny makes her victim of patriarchal dominance.

“Who are those people to say what I 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’ll like with myself and my life! I’ll decide...”¹³

She feels scared if she is alone. Something goes on at the back of her mind all the time, that’s why she places hand on her stomach unconsciously. Whenever she feels like expressing her hidden feelings or thoughts, she starts singing or reciting verses by heart. At one point in the play she says, she is fine but starts crooning an English song with clapping her hands to express her sadness.

“Oh, I’ve got a sweetheart
Who carries all my books,
He plays in my doll house,
And says he likes my looks.
I’ll tell you a secret-
He wants to marry me.
But Mummy says, I’m too little
To have such thoughts as these.”¹⁴

This song indicates towards her unfulfilled love and broken heart at the very tender age. Then at some other moment she recites a poem which talks about some defeat,

“Our feet tread on upon unknown
And dangerous pathways evermore.
Wave after blinded wave is shattered
Stormily upon the shore.
Light glows alive again. Again
It mingles with the dark of night.

Our earthen hands burn out, and then
Again in flames they are alight.
Everything is fully known,
And everything is clear to see.
And the wound that's born to bleed
Bleeds on forever, faithfully.
There is a battle sometimes, where
Defeat is destined as the end.
Some experiences are meant
To taste, then just to waste and spend... *"¹⁵

Then she leaves the poem in the middle and starts singing a song:

'An old man from Malad, the old man's wife, the wife's little baby, the
baby's nurse, the nurse's visitor...'¹⁶

She loves her things a lot and seems to be quite possessive. It is clear from a poem
which she used to write on the cover of every book in childhood,

"The grass is green,
The rose is red.
This book is mine
Till I am dead!"¹⁷

She is fond of reading books in spare time. She loves to keep herself busy,
well-practices and prepares task in hand, and is always ready to learn something
new. She doesn't like thrillers. When Sukhatme offers her 105th novel by Suryakant
Phatarphekar, she refuses to read. Even she doesn't like religious books like Bible
and Bhagwat Gita because she thinks those are meant for old people. Her philosophy
can be heard many a times in the play,

"...don't be in a hurry to write down what you've hardly heard! First
listen...say it yourself slowly...send it deep inside you. Then it'll stay with
you. It must mingle with your blood. It'll only stay once it's in your blood. No
one can take it from you then- or make you forget it!"¹⁸

She is there to act in the Atomic Weapon's Trial which is done seven times
in the past three months and today night it is going to happen eighth time. Before the
final performance her team decides to practice a different type of case in a make-

believe court to make Samant understand the workings of the court. After getting fresh, when she is ready to practice, she murmurs a song,

“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!”¹⁹

This song reveals her profound sorrow as she is crying in heart of hearts because of some dearest loss. During rehearsal of this imaginary court scene a charge of social significance is imposed on Leela Benare to give case a different complexion with a woman standing in the dock.

“Prisoner Miss Benare, under Section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code you are accused of the crime of infanticide. Are you guilty or not guilty of the aforementioned crime?”²⁰

She stiffens as she comes to know that she is going to be prosecuted for this charge. She doesn't like this case of infanticide, instead she thinks it a better option to become accused for snatching public property. She gives logic that she can't even kill a cockroach then how could she kill a newly born.

Though she is declared accused by a mock court yet she is in a shocking state and looks around numbly. To face this case is like rolling on the live coals for her. She looks stunned and doesn't accept *Pan*. Sukhatme tries to make her understand that this is just a game, even then she doesn't move and tries to hide her seriousness with fake smile. There seems to be something fishy hidden inside her when she speaks by herself, “Why should I be afraid of a trial like this?”²¹

By nature, she shows signs of a rebellious woman with questioning mind. When Sukhatme says, “Motherhood is a sacred thing-”²²she asks him, “How do you know?”²³ When Kashikar speaks a Sanskrit proverb, “Janani janmabhumishcha svargadapi gariyasi”²⁴ she says this is copied from school composition book. She mimics Kashikar when she says, “a reprimand is once more issued to you.”²⁵

During the trial different witnesses accuse her differently G.N. Ponshe tries to intrude in her private life. He says “...she runs after men too much”.²⁶

Next witness Karnik who knows her through Living Lawcourt says, “Sometimes we think we know someone. But in fact, we don't. Truth is stranger than fiction.”²⁷ He tells Sukhatme that she was found in a compromising situation with Rokde...

When Ponkshe asks Karnik what did Rokde see, Karnik says, "Who says he did? I was just joking, that's all. You passed the buck to me, I passed it to him. The game's got to go on, hasn't it? Sukhatme's I mean."²⁸ It reveals dirty mind of patriarchal society, how for their ego satisfaction they sling mud on a female without giving their cheap words second thought, without thinking about her feelings.

Next, Rokde accuses her of being at Professor Damle's residence at the time of falling night. Only Samant calls her behaviour exemplary and sees her as a nice lady. They say to Samant that this crime is imaginary but accused is real. Through this make-believe court they are trying to take some personal revenge from her as they are jealous of her frankness, boldness and newness in ideas.

Samant also grabs opportunity to practice as witness and gives false statement that she was saying to Professor Damle, "If you abandon me, I shall have no choice but to take my life."²⁹ "Bear in mind that you will not escape the guilt of murdering two."³⁰

She blames them angrily, "**You've all deliberately ganged up on me! You've plotted against me!**"³¹

They tease by calling her Leela Damle, comment on her age, make fun and try to convince her that she looks aged. They insist on calling her a woman instead of young girl. After knowing her age Kashikar says, our society should revive the old custom of child marriage."³² They make pungent remarks again and again.

Mrs. Kashikar also expresses her jealousy towards Benare because she doesn't like victim's free lifestyle. Though she is herself a woman and living a suffocating life yet she doesn't hesitate to blame Benare, she says, "... I don't like to say anything since she's one of us. Should there be no limit to how freely a woman can behave with a man? An unmarried woman!? No matter how well she knows him? Look how loudly she laughs. How she sings, dances, cracks jokes. And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out!"³³ At this Benare loses her spirits. Mrs. Kashikar says once at night time they offered to drop her but Benare refused and vanished with Damle. She again remarks that Benare doesn't want to get married, "What else? This is what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care less about responsibility!"³⁴

After that Rokde accuses her of holding his hand in the dark after performance. He says, when he tried to freed his hand, "She moved away. She said, 'Don't tell anyone what happened.'"³⁵ "If you tell anyone, I'll do something to you.

That's what she said to me, Anna."³⁶Rokde says that he slapped her for this sinful act eight days ago after the performance at Dombivli.

Ponkshe accuses her of keeping a bottle of TIK-20 in her purse, a powerful bedbug poison. He says, once she called me in Udipi restaurant and insisted me to shift to some family room. There she expressed her desire to marry me. He commented that she was pregnant by one man and expressed desire to marry another.

She goes through a shattering heartbreak even then she doesn't abuse Damle. Instead, she tries to understand his problem. She does her best to cover up her sorrows and vicissitudes. When Ponkshe refuses to marry her. She changes the scene immediately and starts laughing as she was telling a joke.

Then an immoral love affair of hers is revealed. Karnik as a witness says he knows a cousin of the accused at Dadar Gymkhans, who told that the accused "attempted suicide because of disappointment in love. She fell in love at the age of fifteen, with her own maternal uncle! That's what ended in disappointment."³⁷

Mr. Kashikar says famous leader Nana Sahib Shinde of Bombay says, "A school-mistress from our Education Society's High School had come here."³⁸He further adds, "there Nanasaheb was talking angrily to someone on the phone. 'It is a sin to be pregnant before marriage. It would be still more immoral to let such a woman teach, in such a condition! There is no alternative- this woman must be dismissed,' he was saying. Finally, he instructed, 'Send the order for my signature this very day!'"³⁹

In the end Benare expresses her agony:

"For so many years, I haven't said a word. Chances came, and chances went... When great waves of words came and beat against my lips, how stupid everyone around me, how childish, how silly they all seemed... I used to wish my heart would break! My life was a burden to me. (...) But when you can't lose it, you will realize the value of it. You realize the value of living. You see what happiness means. How new, how wonderful every moment is!"⁴⁰

She seems to be true liver of life in the beginning and gradually turns out to be a pessimistic loser. She says,

"Life is a book that goes ripping into pieces. Life is a poisonous snake that bites itself. Life is a betrayal. Life is a fraud. Life is a drug. Life is drudgery. Life's a something that's nothing- or a nothing that's something. (...) Milord, life is a very dreadful thing. Life must be hanged. *Na Jeevan jeevanamarhati*. 'Life is not worthy

of life.”⁴¹

Her fighting spirit and strength of character is revealed through personal values and good thoughts in the following lines:

“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, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair, and I taught them hope. For what reason 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?”⁴²

She confesses,

“It’s true, I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother’s brother. But in our strict house, in the prime of my unfolding youth, he was the one who came close to me. He praised my bloom every day. He gave me love...How was I to know what if you felt like breaking yourself into bits and melting into one with someone- if you felt that just being with him gave 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 mother, I didn’t! (...) I insisted on marriage. So I could live my beautiful lovely dream openly. Like everyone else!”⁴³

But everyone opposes and she tries to commit suicide by throwing herself off the parapet of her house. Then as a woman she falls in love with an intellectual person but he didn’t care about her devotion he “wasn’t a God. He was a man. For whom everything was the body, for the body!”⁴⁴

To be rescued from this trial, she tries to commit suicide by consuming TIK-20 as she wants to finish this humiliation forever. She voices pain of losing her child with a song:

“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...”⁴⁵

Compressing her character, one can feel binaries in Benare’s character:

She is a child as well as a mature woman,
She is innocent as well as experienced,
She is cheerful as well as sad,
She is silent as well as garrulous,

She is lively as well as shattered,
She is presented as a care giver as well as a killer,
She is independent as well as dependent,
She is a winner as well as a loser,
She is prosecuted imaginatively as well as in reality.

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