

Miss Leela Benare: Neither an Angel nor a Witch in “Silence! the Court is in Session” by Vijay Tendulkar

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Abstract

This paper tries to observe the character of Miss Leela Benare in the novel “Silence the Court is in Session” by Vijay Tendulkar. Miss Benare is the voice of self-assertion and individuality that endows her with the identity of a ‘new woman’ emerging against the coercive attacks of patriarchy which tend to control the body of a woman with all its might. Her individuality is always followed by her identity as a woman. She is a no less than anybody of her class, rather superior in status and quality to many of them who criticize and humiliate her for her choice of being a single mother. Society has nothing to say to the man who impregnated her nor does Miss Benare hold him solely responsible for her condition. All that she wants is to live with dignity and love for her child. She denies to be framed in any literary type of woman which is mainly either of an angel or a witch. She claims her right as a human only who is free to make her own choice in life. But such self-dependent, confident woman is a threat to the patriarchal society who takes it as his responsibility to punish and disgrace her.

Keywords

Self-assertion, individuality, choice, patriarchy, disgrace

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Introduction

The play is a play within a play where through a mock trial an independent and lively woman is gradually led to a trap by her co-mates in an amateur theatrical group. Miss Benare had been sexually exploited by Prof. Damle who is already married and is a father too. He is the father of Miss Benare's unborn child but he refuses to take his responsibility. She has to seek a father for her child and so, she stoops low to solicit marriage with anyone of their group, though much inferior to her because in a male-dominated society a fatherless child has no social recognition and place.

The mock-trial gradually becomes serious. Her moral conduct is questioned. She is proved guilty of destroying the social and moral codes and sacredness of marriage and motherhood. She should therefore leave her job and destroy the baby in her womb. Benare is thus betrayed, humiliated and baited by her co-actors but not even once is Prof. Damle condemned for being responsible for Benare's wretched condition.

In literature women have been mostly shown in two stereotypes: the submissive female, an angel in the house or the dangerous female as monster (The Mad Woman in Attic by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber). This age-old fantasies of writers have fixed the situation of women in society and any effort to come out of such frames claim a lot on their part. Women in literature are either Lady Macbeth (Macbeth), Estella (Great Expectation), Abigail (The Crucible) Milady De Winter (The Three Musketeers) or they are Miranda (The Tempest), Rosalind (As you Like It), Jeanie Deans (The Heart of Midlothian), Hester Prynne (The Scarlet Letter) etc. Good Women are shown to accept social norms and are rewarded with happiness. Even feisty heroines eventually go onto find content and life's purpose in a good man's arms be it Elizabeth Bennet (Pride and Prejudice) or Jane Eyre (Jane Eyre). Since classics women have been held tightly to several role models as their guides while male characters have been given free rein to be and become what they like, even to fail if they choose. Women characters have been written to play and re-play the same role limited as they are. Thus, when the female characters deviate from the norms, from those stringent stereotypes, more attention is then called to the purity of what the female character is supposed to be. Men are encouraged to be man both in life and literature. Women are forced to rise above being a woman. Women strive to be more man-like and are condemned when they take on male characteristics like aggression, ambition etc. Since long, sacrifices and selflessness have been focused as integral part of a woman's make up and if she tries to liberate herself from her submissive role she immediately becomes a domineering character nasty and unkind.

Method

The method applied for the study is the analytical method. The study analyses the expected literary and social representation of a woman. The study has been conducted from a feminist point of view. The study examines how the text relates to the society and time period it emerged from, considering social and economic issues, and potentially connecting it to power dynamics within the text. The present analytical study focuses on its theme of patriarchy, societal hypocrisy and the exploitation of women. Key aspects of the analysis include Leela Benare's role as a "new woman" challenging traditional gender roles, the play's satirical depiction of the Indian Justice system, and how it uses a mock-trial to expose societal double standards and the manipulation of power through language and moral judgement. The play also provides a commentary on the changing dynamics of post-independence India and the vulnerability of independent women in a patriarchal society.

Analysis

Miss Leela Benare is a teacher who does everything in time. None can find fault with her work. She is never late nor is behind-hand with her lessons. Children adore her. But society has nothing to do with these qualities of a woman which enable her to secure her own identity. The school management and her companions are rather jealous of her freedom and cheerfulness. Success of a woman arouses jealousy in the hearts of unsuccessful section of the patriarchal society and so is the case with the co-mates of miss Benare. None of them could achieve their aims in life. Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar remained childless, Ponkshe could not become a scientist. Sukhatme is an unsuccessful lawyer. Balu Rokde remained economically, psychologically and emotionally dependent on Kashikars. In the attack on Benare, their sense of failure and defeat surfaces as they try their best to have sadistic pleasure in her discomfiture.

Mr. Kashikar is intensely critical of working independent women. To him with a free independent woman society is in danger. She is bound to corrupt this holy institution by her wantonness and unchecked liberty. An unmarried expectant woman is self-destructive and is a 'canker that corrodes the fabric of the society'. Sukhatme supports him by saying 'No allowance must be made because the accused is a woman. Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society'. "Na Sthree swathanthryam arhati", Woman is not fit for independence. She is not able enough to take her responsibility. There must be some male to guide and teach her who consciously or unconsciously constantly remind her of her physical weakness and takes her to be intellectually inferior. The male ego always pulls her

back and tries to keep her under control.

These upholders of social norms will not accept a child outside marriage but have nothing to say about the man who corrupts the innocence of a woman. They are excused like children. Their vulnerability is seldom taken seriously. For society man will be man but woman should be on her guard. This is the double standard of the society that tries to find solution to all ills of society in the crucifixion of its women. She is expected to bear the burden of the norms and codes of society. This burden binds her within the threshold of the house where she is trapped with the responsibilities of family and children. She can neither meet herself nor can realise herself as an individual. Her potentialities never get any opportunity to flourish and if she tries she will have to do that with the responsibility of family and children but men are never pointed out for any lacuna towards the domestic responsibilities. The following lines are quite suitable in this context:

If Janey does become a doctor, she will feel guilty at not being a mommy, or as good a mommy as she ought to be. Johny will not feel at all guilty about being a doctor, whether he is a daddy or not.

The proverbs like “Be thy mother as a god” and “Mother and the motherhood both are even higher than heaven” used by Mr. Sukhatme and Mr. Kashikar, mentally frame the women in our society to be the goddess. She is called goddess and the goddess is deprived of her right as a human. Because of such mental framing Prof. Damle easily got rid of what he did but Miss Benare has to undergo the humiliation. There will be no punishment for him but she will have to leave her job because the teacher who is adored by the children will exert corrupting influence on them because the father of the foetus refused to own it. Motherhood by marriage is considered sacred and pure. Motherhood through illicit union is a blow to the purity and dignity of social life. But if it is so why only women are victimized in such cases while men who exploit women’s love and worship are exempted from social and moral transgression. This play is not a plea for feminism or wantonness in the name of freedom but a strong advocacy of a social system which does not make women preys to male domination and chauvinism. This play is a woman’s urge to have individual identity. Miss Benare dared to defy the social-moral code of sexuality framed by men in order to control the body of women. As a teenage girl she was seduced by her own maternal uncle She admits, ‘...it is true I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother’s brother...I was hardly fourteen! I did not even know what sin was...and my brave man turned tail and ran.’ Again, her search for true love brought her to the “intellectual God” Prof. Damle. About this affair she says, “I thought this will be different. It is love for an unusual intellect, it is not love at all-

it is worship! But it was the same mistake I offered my body on the altar of my worship and my intellectual god took the offering and went his way..."

She revolts against her body because the body has brought about her sad plight in life. In her teen age her maternal uncle had an eye on her body. He praised her adolescent beauty exploited it and fled. In her young age she loved an "intellectual god" but he too used her body and abandoned her. "...He was not a God. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body!... This body is a traitor?" I despise this body and I love it! - but it is all you have, in the end, is not it?... The urge of the body brought her ruin but she cannot hate it because she had the experience of the blissful feeling of the body. But again, she says whatever she did was her personal. No one has any right to interfere in her personal life. She is the sole guardian of her wishes. The management will see only how she performs in school. "But what can they do to me?... just because of one bit of slander, what can they do to me?... I have not hurt anyone...who are these people to say what I can or cannot do? ... My wishes are my own. No one can kill those-no one, I will do what I like with myself and my life! I will decide..." Leela Benare is introduced in the drama as a vivacious character with a spontaneous "joie de vivre" to borrow Arundhati Banerjee's expression. She dared to fall in love, and is cheated twice. In her first incestuous emotional involvement, the punishment was inflicted in private but in the other her love affair was exposed by her pregnancy. Though prof. Damle denied, she is ready to take the responsibility of the fruit of the blissful moment of her life and even stoops low to arrange a father to give the child a respectable name in the patriarchal society. Mr. Kashikar declares, "No memento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore, this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed." At this Benare refuses boldly to allow it and cries, "I won't let it happen." She revolts like Sarita in "Kamla", Laxmi in "Sakharam Binder, and Vijayain 'Encounter in Umbugland" who fought for their liberation and Individuality against the male dictates which rule society in the name of morality. She reminds the character of Alka in Mahesh Dattani's 'Bravely Fought the Queen' who ignores the social norms and dictates only to be accused as a 'bad' woman by the orthodox society.

Conclusion

Benare always harps on the independence of life. One should be guided by one's instincts and wishes. She loved one in her teen age and she again loved another man She has lust for life and wants to live with zest and satisfaction of senses and passion. Neither did she hurt anyone nor refused to take the responsibility of her child. She believed someone and he cheated on her. But to her the unborn child is

the product of a beautiful moment of her life so, her motherhood is pure and sacred. It is neither her instincts nor her pregnancy but the orthodox society which makes her feel guilty. But males guilty of moral lapses and worst deceptions are allowed to move freely without the least sense of guilt. The tragedy with a woman in the society is that she is more a woman than a human being. She has always been treated as subordinate to man, someone to be behind his success as they say and not to be successful herself. She is the 'other sex', the opposite of male and not a separate entity. Benare wants nothing but to live freely. As an individual she wants to live as she wishes and unlike Prof Damie is ready to accept its outcome too. She does not want to get rid of the unborn child to hide her deeds but realises her responsibility and seeks a father for the child to give it a space in society. Benare has lust for life but she is not a frivolous lustful woman. She longs for love, enjoyment, marriage and motherhood. She loves her job, books and nature. She wants to live as she wishes but she is not a feminist. Her monologue is comparable to Nora's powerful rhetoric at the end of Ibsen's "Doll's House". But Benare's monologue does not have that rebellious note. It is only a sensitive soul's anguish at the cruelties of the society. Her monologue is more a self-justification than any protest against the hypocrisies and double standards of the society. She does not want to be treated like an angel in the house nor deserves to be tagged a witch for breaking the barrier to her freedom. At last, she could not stand the ganged-up attack and collapses with her head on the table motionless and her voice is heard singing softly-the parrot to the sparrow said...

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