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## **QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION***

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### **Abstract**

Indian society is still conventional and tradition-bound in many ways despite the spread of education, advancement of science and technology, liberalization and globalization. Still the institution of patriarchy with complicit laws is defining man-woman relations and their roles in every walk of human life. Women are still being oppressed, abused, exploited and deprived of humanity despite the law against gender-discrimination is provisioned in our constitution. In the stifling atmosphere within and outside family, even the modern minded and educated woman has to struggle to assert her identity as human being. If she deviates from the socially-prescribed role, she is considered unwomanly or anti-social woman, and for her new role she is alienated from the mainstream society. Despite all this she keeps struggling to establish her true identity as a human being. The present paper seeks to examine the quest for identity in respect of the educated and working woman, Leela Benare in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Benare, though, is not relied on male counterpart for her sustenance and subsistence; she is exploited and oppressed in various ways. She is not only deprived of the right to have voice and volition but also stigmatized for violating the social norms. Outside wedlock she becomes pregnant and wants to give birth to the baby but opposed by the so-called custodians of social laws. She is neither allowed to live nor is allowed to die.

### **Key-Words**

Patriarchy, Complicit Laws, Gender-discrimination, Wedlock, Quest, Identity.

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Literature reflects social reality by recording human emotions, experiences and aspirations. In the main, literature expresses the norms and customs of society created by man for various purposes. In doing so, they are found biased against women. It is the phenomenon more or less related to the power as man does not want to share power with woman but as a human being she also quests to have power for an independent identity. This quest embarks her on journey towards self-realization on social, psychological, cognitive, economical, local or global level. Education provides knowledge and the latter liberates a person from the shackles of bondage in every walk of life, broadening the periphery of human being, his relations and approaches to the way of life. Education helps a human being cross the boundaries in terms of region, religion, colour and caste/class. The horizon and outlook of life also gets enlarged with the enlightenment process.

The present paper attempts to examine Leela Benare's quest for identity in Vijay Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Benare, an educated girl, emerges as an independent decision maker. As unconventional woman, she challenges the conventional sexual mores and codes and behaviour by carrying casual sexual relations with Prof Damle outside wedlock. While living in this relationship, she conceives and wishes to give birth to the baby in the womb. But she confronts the stiff opposition from both males and females as typical product of the patriarchal order for asserting her sexuality and freedom in an unconventional way. On the other hand, Benare's partner Prof. Damle escapes the social ire by joining hands with the so-called custodians of the oppressive social laws. The fault, if any, of Benare is that she conceives outside wedlock. In this fault, her partner Damle is set free because he is man. Through the character of Damle, the playwright exposes hypocrisy and hollowness of the system with two sets of rules for the same action—one for males and another for females. It is the hypocrisy that denies Benare an identity as unmarried mother that she quests.

Benare challenges the static and stereotypical view that only males can be bread-winners by entering the domain exclusively reserved for males. As a teacher, she gains popularity and

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commands respect from her pupils for her love and devotion to them. Benare has “not heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my teaching. I’m never behindhand with my lessons!”... (Tendulkar 57). For her popularity among the kids, Benare is disliked by other teachers as Benare says, “... that’s why people are jealous, specially the other teachers and the management. But what can they do to me? (Tendulkar 58).

Benare is not afraid of any approaching action or move against her taken by the administration which gets evidenced in the way she posits, “What can they do? However hard they try, what can they do? They are holding an enquiry, if you please! But my teaching is perfect. ...But is that any kind of reason for throwing me out? Who are these 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! (Tendulkar 58). But her new role invites the ire and opposition from males. The school administration governed by males looks at her new role with hatred and suspicion. At this crucial juncture, she finds herself alone caught between tradition and modernity.

The playwright through the character of Benare tries to deconstruct the binary opposition between man and woman where the first is privileged and the second is unprivileged. The way he shapes the role of Benare suggests that women are in no way less than her male counterpart. In the dramatic world of Tendulkar, women at times are portrayed as weak, submissive, obedient and silent sufferer but it does not mean that the playwright does not like to see them rising in life, rather he endows them with strength enough to challenge the man-made oppressive rule. His female characters gain autonomy and independence while undergoing ordeals and sufferings at the hands of males.

In the play, Mrs. Kashikar, another female character, joins hands with male characters against Benare. Mrs. Kashikar entirely relied on her husband becomes the part of the oppressive system and even cannot think of revolt against it. On the other hand, for Benare it is very difficult to identify herself with Mrs. Kashikar who blindly follows the rules laid down by male-dominated world. T.R. Muralikrishnan observes, “Benare is juxtaposed with Mrs. Kashikar so as to make the divide clear. Benare has violated the social taboo. Mrs. Kashikar is middle aged, married, a housewife but childless. Mrs. Kashikar has damaging view against Benare” (199). Mrs. Kashikar directs her ire at Benare, “That’s what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort.... It’s the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That’s how promiscuity has spread throughout our society” (99-100). The playwright suggests that woman should have sisterly bonds among them so that they can fight injustice, violence and oppression at the hands of males.

Not only men but also traditional women raise their voice against the liberal attitude of women by supporting the patriarchal system as Tandrima observes: “The two female characters, Benare and Mrs. Kashikar, are poles apart from each other in respect of their personality and viewpoints. Benare possesses an assertive personality whereas Mrs. Kashikar lacks that assertiveness. Through the authoritative nature what Mrs. Kashikar tries to flaunt is “not an integral part of her character, rather a sham” (qtd. in Muralikrishnan 199). It is conspicuously evident that Mrs. Kashikar’s efforts to venture in establishing herself as a strong woman are foiled in the patriarchal system.

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As a daring woman, Benare happens to crush what is established by the social complicit laws. Without inhibition and hesitation, she carries the illicit relations with Damle and moves forward in the direction of giving birth to a bastard baby. All this leads to the demolition of marriage system and motherhood. As Sukhatme says, "If it is encouraged, there will be no such thing as the institution of marriage left. Immorality will flourish. Before our eyes, our beautiful dream of a society governed by tradition will crumble into dust...Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society..." (Tendulkar 115).

In the conventional society, motherhood is taken as the most pious of all activities. It is manifest in the speech of Sukhatme, "Motherhood is pure. Moreover, there is greater –a great nobility in our concept of motherhood. We have acknowledged woman as the mother of mankind. Our culture enjoins us to perpetual worship of her" (*Silence! The Court is in Session* 79). But when it is outside wedlock, it is despised as a sin. This shows that irony lies at the root of the conception of the idea of motherhood. The game of purity and impurity played by males is a sure sign of their arbitrariness and authority depriving a woman of her true identity.

In the world of materialism, one's importance is measured in terms of money and matter. In Indian society, it is man who enjoys this exclusive right and by virtue of this right he exercises his power over woman. But as self-reliant and independent woman, Benare refuses to go by the male dictates. This position of Benare challenges the view that male can be a sole bread winner in a traditional society. Through the economic independence of Benare, the playwright underscores the view that economic self-reliance can play a vital role in women's liberation from stereo-typed traditional roles. Though Benare has her own individuality and choice, she suffers loneliness and alienation which causes suffering in her life.

With their orthodox and dogmatic rules, both the male and female characters prevent Benare from becoming a mother and living a decent and independent life. With their politics they leave her in an utterly alienated, helpless and powerless condition. Smita

Mishra comments that "this kind of sheer cruelty and inhumanity is inherent in all these characters because they know no way of relating to other people except by exploitation" (118). In the similar vein, Wadikar comments that *Silence! The Court is in Session* discusses "the problem of unmarried motherhood through the conflict between an individual and society where innocence is ruthlessly crushed by cruelty" (3). Though she strives to be bonded with others, she wants to become a mother but she is denied motherhood as well. The advocates of harmony in the society plead for stopping the independence of woman as it, to them, destroys the social traditions. Sukhatme says:

Miss Leela Benare, is truly dreadful. The woman who is an accused has made the heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood –which is purer than heaven itself. ... the character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality. ...the accused has committed a far more serious crime. I mean unmarried motherhood. Motherhood without marriage has always been considered a very great sin by our religion and traditions. .... Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. 'Na striswatantryamarhati.' Woman is not fit for independence.' ... that is the rule laid down for us by tradition. (Tendulkar 114-15)

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Tendulkar revolts against the established conventions so that new change takes place. He exposes the selfish and hypocritical nature of man in his dramatic world. "*Silence! The Court is in Session* explores psychological violence of the frustrated people in the white collar middle-class society" (Wadikar 7). Benare becomes restless and confined when she proclaims, "You've all deliberately ganged up on me! You've plotted against me!" (Tendulkar 93). The playwright draws our attention to the so-called modern society where Benare is used and left alone to suffer while males are only interested in fulfilling their carnal desire. She is victimized and left alone to suffer without any support. "She is forced to live a lonely, solitary life. So, it is easy for them to treat her as though she were a use and throw object. The tragedy of her life does not end with this only. Miss Benare becomes an object of ridicule among her companions who pose that they are the upholders of moral values of society. Benare is, therefore, made a scapegoat" (Wadikar 15).

As a school teacher, Leela Benare is conscientious in her work and commands the love and respect of all her pupils. She is also an enlightened activist, being a member of the amateur theatre group called, "The Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association." As Chandrasekhar Barve comments:

This is not a play about the cornering of Benare, nor about the cornered Benare. In fact, the dramatic element in it is derived from the situation in which the 'being' of Benare is engulfed by the social existence of her individuality. She tries to express her ego openly and freely; and finally, it is throttled, 'Life is something like nothingness' – these crazy words of Benare are good comment on the nothingness of our being" (24).

The above comments make it clear that patriarchal social order does not tolerate any dissenting and protesting voice against its norms. If any woman dares so, she is hushed up in the name of social sanity and sacrosanct. Strictures passed against Benare amount to denial of an independent existence. Her lone voice gets submerged in the dominating majority voices of superficial, unkind and cruel males. In the beginning, Benare is audacious, spirited and concerned about the relations. In her jolly mood and carefree attitude towards life, she cannot think about the evil consequences. She asserts, "My life is my own. My will is my own. My wishes are my own. No one can kill those – no one! I will do what I like with myself and my life" (Tendulkar 58). Benare dares to rebel against the oppressive restrictions to enhance her development. Her eagerness to empower herself with the light of education proves equally futile for her. Her non-conformity and resistance to the archetypal principles renders her a failed and unhappy future. She is dismissed from her job of a school teacher based on the society's assessment of her past life. Benare says, "For what sin 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" (Tendulkar 117).

The foregoing discussion reveals the hideous and hidden face of patriarchal social order that denies a woman an independent identity. Still an Indian woman has to live according to the male ethos and social dictates. If she tries to an independent life, deviating from the cramping societal norms, she is not only despised but also dubbed as a loose and unwomanly woman. In her quest to identify herself as an independent working woman competing with the males, she is left alone and destitute. Neither she is allowed to become a mother nor granted permission to belong to anyone. Through her job as school teacher she wants to link herself to the outer world but for

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asserting her independent identity she is stripped of the only means of livelihood and all her relations. The playwright, thus, shows a woman questing for identity in the face of the hostile and hideous attitude of the male-dominated world.

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