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Gender, Power, and Complicity in the Select Plays of Vijay Tendulkar

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Abstract: Among the dramatists who reshaped Indian theatre after Independence, Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008) occupies a distinctive place. Writing in Marathi for a middle-class urban audience, he produced plays that refuse consolation. They stage cruelty as an ordinary feature of domestic, professional, and communal life, and they locate that cruelty in people who regard themselves as decent. Nowhere is this strategy more visible than in his treatment of women. In *Silence! The Court Is in Session* (1967), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kamala* (1981), and *Kanyadaan* (1983), women are tried, bought, kept, married, and beaten, yet the plays resist reducing them to emblems of suffering. They ask who is entitled to judge a woman's body, who profits from her dependence, and how a society persuades both men and women to accept the arrangement.

Keywords: *Complicity, Gender, Power, Politics, Society.*

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Introduction

This paper argues that Tendulkar presents patriarchy not as the aberration of individual villains but as a collectively maintained system, sustained through law, marriage, sexual morality, economic dependence, and caste hierarchy, and enforced with the participation of women as well as men. It argues further that his dramaturgy, built on irony, the staged ritual of the mock trial, and the withholding of resolution, forces the audience into the position of witness and thereby into complicity. Finally, the paper considers the limits of this achievement: the plays are written from a position of observation rather than from the lived experience of the women they depict, and critics have debated whether his heroines are granted full agency or only the dignity of defiance. The analysis draws on feminist theory, on historical scholarship on gender in India, and on theatre criticism to read the plays as sustained inquiries into the "women's question" in modern India.

Critical and Historical Context

Tendulkar's treatment of women belongs to a longer history of debate about gender in India. Nineteenth-century reformers made the condition of women central to arguments about colonial modernity, campaigning against sati and child marriage and for widow remarriage and female education (Kumar). Partha Chatterjee has argued that Indian nationalism later resolved this "women's question" by dividing life into an outer, material domain open to Western influence and an inner, spiritual domain, the home, whose guardian was the woman and whose purity she was to preserve (Chatterjee). The consequence was an ideal of the middle-class woman as chaste, self-sacrificing, and domestic. This ideal survived Independence and remained a powerful disciplinary norm in the decades in which Tendulkar wrote.

Uma Chakravarti's concept of "Brahmanical patriarchy" adds a necessary dimension. Chakravarti shows that the control of women's sexuality in India has historically been bound up with the maintenance of caste boundaries, since endogamy requires that women's reproduction be regulated (Chakravarti). Gender oppression, in this account, cannot be separated from caste and class. Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential notion of intersectionality supplies a parallel vocabulary: the experience of a Dalit woman, for instance, is not simply the sum of caste discrimination and sexism but a distinct position produced by their interaction (Crenshaw). Such frameworks are indispensable for reading *Kanyadaan*, and they illuminate the other plays as well.

Two further theoretical resources shape the readings below. Simone de Beauvoir's argument that woman is constituted as the "Other" against a male norm, and that femininity is made rather than given, helps explain why Tendulkar's female characters are so often judged against an imagined standard of womanhood (Beauvoir). Judith Butler's account of gender as a repeated, socially policed performance clarifies how the plays dramatize punishment for failed performance: the unmarried mother, the woman who will not cook, the wife who will not remain silent (Butler). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's warning against representing "Third World women" as a homogeneous, perpetually victimized category is a necessary counterweight, reminding the critic to attend to the specificity of each character rather than reading her as a symbol (Mohanty).

The Trial of Leela Benare: *Silence! The Court Is in Session*

Silence! The Court Is in Session is built around a deceptively playful premise. A group of amateur actors arrives in a village to stage a mock trial for a performance, and while waiting for the audience they rehearse with a fictional accused. They draft Leela Benare, a schoolteacher, to play the defendant, charged with infanticide. As the game proceeds, the fiction becomes a vehicle for exposing her actual circumstances: she is unmarried, she has

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had a relationship with a married man, and she is pregnant (Tendulkar, *Silence*, act 2). Tendulkar acknowledged that the play grew out of a story by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, but he relocated its logic of a game turned into a real judgment to an unmistakably Indian middle-class setting.

The structure is the argument. The mock trial reveals that the community already possesses a verdict. The charge of infanticide is a pretext, since the real offence the court tries is that Benare is a financially independent, sexually active woman who has refused to conform. Her accusers are respectable figures, a lawyer, a social-work enthusiast, a scientist, and the officious organizer of the event, who invoke the language of morality, national duty, and the sanctity of motherhood. The proceedings thus resemble what Michel Foucault describes as the disciplinary apparatus of modern society, in which the exercise of power takes the form of examination, surveillance, and normalization, and in which judgment operates less through spectacular punishment than through the continuous regulation of conduct (Foucault). The "court" has no legal standing, but it does not need any: its authority derives from social consensus.

Crucially, the play does not present women as simply the victims of male judges. Mrs. Kashikar, the wife of the self-important organizer, is among the most eager participants in Benare's humiliation. Her moral disapproval, expressed in gossip and in remarks about the proper conduct of women, shows how patriarchal norms are reproduced and enforced by those who benefit from them only marginally, if at all (Tendulkar, *Silence*, act 1). Here Tendulkar anticipates the feminist insight that women may become guardians of the system that confines them, protecting their small measure of respectability by policing others. The play's cruelty is also a cruelty of laughter. The men tease Benare, rehearse accusations as comedy, and invite the audience to share the pleasure of the game before the joke becomes unbearable.

Benare herself resists easy characterization. She is vivacious, articulate, and in the early scenes apparently at ease; as the trial closes in, she is stripped of that ease, and her final monologue lays bare her vulnerability, her loneliness, and her insistence on the right to bear a child and to love (Tendulkar, *Silence*, act 3). Her tragedy lies in the discovery that her economic independence offers no protection once her body becomes the object of communal scrutiny. Butler's formulation is apt: Benare's offence is a failure of gender performance, and the community punishes her to restore the norm. The play ends not with resolution but with a return to the ordinary, as the actors prepare to leave and the pause in the room deepens, and the absence of catharsis is itself the point. The audience, having laughed, has taken part in the trial.

Domesticity as Contract: *Sakharam Binder*

If *Silence!* examines the public tribunal, *Sakharam Binder* examines the household. The title character is a bookbinder who, as a self-declared nonconformist, takes in women abandoned by their husbands and lives with them without marriage, on terms he considers honest. He asks for domestic labour and sexual availability; in return he provides shelter and a measure of security. He prides himself on candour and mocks the hypocrisy of conventional marriage. The play traces the arrival of two women whose temperaments test his arrangement: Laxmi, devout and conciliatory, and Champa, defiant, drinking, and sexually assertive (Tendulkar, *Sakharam*, act 1).

Tendulkar's achievement is to make Sakharam's rejection of orthodoxy reveal, rather than repair, the structure of male dominance. Sakharam breaks the rules of Brahmanical respectability, yet retains the central privilege of the household: the power to set the terms. The women have no comparable power, because they have nowhere else to go. In Beauvoir's terms, they are defined by their relation to him, and their security is conditional on his satisfaction (Beauvoir). What looks like an alternative to the institution of marriage turns out to reproduce its economics, and it does so without even the customary pretence of obligation. The play thus complicates any reading that treats unconventional male behaviour as emancipator for women. Sakharam may flout social convention, but he does not question his entitlement.

Laxmi and Champa represent two strategies of survival within unequal conditions. Laxmi accepts the role of the dutiful, pious wife, cooking, fasting, and tending the household, since the performance of domestic virtue offers her the only security she can imagine. Champa refuses this role. She declines to cook, drinks with Sakharam, and speaks plainly about her past and her desires. Her presence exposes the contingency of Sakharam's generosity, and her refusal of his rules becomes both the source of her dignity and the cause of her destruction. The play ends with her murder at Sakharam's hands, a violent confirmation that the arrangement was tolerable to him only so long as the woman remained compliant (Tendulkar, *Sakharam*, act 2).

The play also stages the competition and misunderstanding between the two women. Their conflict is not presented as a flaw in female character but as the predictable effect of a situation in which women must compete for the provisional protection of one man. This is one of Tendulkar's most persistent analytical gestures: he locates the sources of women's mutual hostility in structural dependence rather than in temperament. Critics have noted that the play's frankness about sexuality and violence provoked censorship and public controversy on its early productions (Gokhale; Dharwadker), a reaction that itself demonstrates the discomfort the play produces. A middle-class audience was invited to recognize in the bookbinder's home a distorted mirror of its own domestic arrangements.

The Market and the Marriage: *Kamala*

Kamala takes as its starting point a journalist's exposé of the trade in women, an investigation that, in the play, begins when the protagonist purchases a woman at a rural market in order to display her at a press conference. Jaisingh Jadhav, a successful investigative reporter, brings Kamala home to his wife Sarita as living proof of the trafficking he intends to expose. The play, which was inspired by a real incident in which a journalist bought a woman to dramatize the existence of such markets, interrogates the ethics of the exposé itself (Tendulkar, *Kamala*, act 1).

The irony on which the play turns is that Jaisingh, in the act of denouncing the commodification of women, commodifies Kamala further. She is a prop, a source of professional advancement, and an instrument of his reputation. When his career is complicated by the consequences of his own stunt, he treats her as an inconvenience. The play thereby offers a critique not only of the traffickers but of the liberal, professional, and journalistic class that claims to oppose exploitation while profiting from its spectacle. The sympathetic gaze, Tendulkar suggests, can be a form of appropriation.

Sarita is the play's most important figure of recognition. At first the conventional wife, comfortable and self-effacing, she gradually perceives, through her conversations with Kamala, that her own position has more in common with the purchased woman's than she had admitted. Kamala has been bought at a market; Sarita has been maintained within a marriage whose terms she did not set, enjoying material comfort but not autonomy (Tendulkar, *Kamala*, act 2). The parallel is not a claim of equivalence, and Tendulkar carefully preserves the differences in their situations, but it demonstrates how economic dependence structures both. Chakravarti's observation that the control of women's labour and sexuality is embedded in the institutions of family and marriage finds dramatic illustration here (Chakravarti).

Kamala herself is drawn with restraint. She is not romanticized as a noble victim, and she is not granted a speech that resolves her condition. Her bewilderment, her gratitude toward those who have purchased her, and her fragmentary understanding of what has happened to her convey the extent to which exploitation can shape consciousness. This portrayal also guards against the danger Mohanty identifies, the transformation of the exploited woman into a symbol that speaks for all women (Mohanty). Kamala remains specific, partially opaque, and unredeemed by the narrative. The play's ending, in which Sarita begins to articulate a new understanding of her own situation, offers not a triumph but a beginning, and the awareness that alters Sarita's relationship to her household is purchased at a cost that Kamala has borne.

Caste, Reform, and the Gift of the Daughter: *Kanyadaan*

Kanyadaan, whose title refers to the Hindu ritual of giving away the bride, addresses the intersection of caste and gender. Jyoti, the daughter of Nath Devlalikar, a socialist politician and public advocate of social reform, announces that she will marry Arun Athavale, a Dalit writer. Her parents, committed in principle to the abolition of caste, support the marriage as an expression of their ideals. The marriage rapidly proves violent: Arun beats Jyoti, drinks, and uses his history of suffering to justify his conduct, while Jyoti, to her family's horror, defends him and insists on remaining with him (Tendulkar, *Kanyadaan*, act 2).

The play is Tendulkar's most uncomfortable examination of progressive liberalism. Nath's commitment to equality is genuine, but it rests on an abstraction; he has treated his daughter as the means by which his principles are to be realized. The marriage is, in effect, a second *kanyadaan*, in which the daughter is given in the service of an ideology rather than a tradition. Jyoti's own desires and judgment have been displaced by the family's need to see its values vindicated. When the marriage fails to deliver the expected outcome, Nath's world collapses, and the play registers how a reformist politics that neglects the actual woman is capable of reproducing the subordination it claims to oppose.

The play has been controversial because of its portrayal of a Dalit character who is violent toward his wife, and Tendulkar's critics have charged him with reinforcing prejudice. The more rigorous reading is that the play insists on the complexity of oppression: Arun is simultaneously a victim of caste violence and a perpetrator of domestic violence, and the play refuses to allow either fact to cancel the other. Here, intersectionality offers a useful framework (Crenshaw). Jyoti's position is shaped by her caste privilege and her gender subordination simultaneously, and the play shows that solidarity across caste lines does not automatically dissolve the hierarchies within the household. Sharmila Rege's work on the testimonies of Dalit women, which demonstrates that Dalit women's experience has been marginalized both within feminist and within Dalit movements, underscores why such a play is unsettling: it insists on the problem of gender within the very movements committed to social justice (Rege).

Jyoti's insistence on remaining with Arun is the play's most debated gesture. Some critics read it as a tragic misrecognition, a form of self-sacrifice that confirms patriarchal expectations of women's endurance. Others read it as an assertion of agency, an insistence that she, not her father, will determine the meaning of her choice. Tendulkar does not adjudicate. Jyoti's decision is neither endorsed as feminist liberation nor condemned as false consciousness; it is presented as the act of a woman who refuses to allow her father's ideological framework, or the audience's, to define her life.

Conclusion

Vijay Tendulkar's plays offer a sustained and unsparing analysis of the conditions under which women live in modern India. Through the mock tribunal of *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, the contractual household of *Sakharam Binder*, the media spectacle of *Kamala*, and the failed reformist marriage of *Kanyadaan*, he demonstrates that patriarchy operates through institutions as various as law, journalism, and progressive politics, and that it enlists the participation of those it subordinates. His characters are shaped by caste, class, and sexuality in ways that anticipate the concerns of later feminist scholarship, including the work of Chakravarti, Crenshaw, and Rege.

The plays are not without limitations. Their pessimism, their male-centred vantage, and their reluctance to imagine transformation have drawn legitimate criticism. But their power rests precisely on their refusal to console. By forcing audiences to witness injustice without the relief of a resolution, Tendulkar makes recognition the beginning of responsibility. His theatre remains valuable to students of gender and drama because it insists that the position of women in society is not a marginal topic but a test of the moral claims of the society as a whole.

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