

LIFTING UP THE LATCH OF LIBERTY A STUDY OF VIJAY TENDULKAR'S SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION

P. Renuga

Assistant Professor, English, Sri G. V. G. Visalakshi College for Women, Udamalpet, India
Email: gvgrenuganatarajan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Vijay Tendulkar 'the angry young man' of Marathi theatre is identified as a rebel against the established values of a fundamentally orthodox society. The theatre group in Silence! The Court is in Session that comes to Bombay to stage a play is a miniature cross-section of the middle class society. The members of the drama troupe are representatives of its sub-strata. Their spiteful attitude to Leela Benare, their fellow artist reflects their malicious and spiteful attitude towards their fellow beings. A well targeted conspiracy is hatched out against her in the name of a mock trial. Benare is assigned to play the role of the accused and the custodians of the orthodox values expose and dissect her personal life and blight her psyche. Their attitude towards her reveals the basic hypocrisy and double standards of the Patriarchal Indian society. Benare understands that the game is carried too far and rushes to open the door of the hall. But the obstinate latch did not yield. Though educated and economically independent, women like Benare need to lift up so many 'latches' to enjoy the air of freedom.

Keywords: Tendulkar, Benare, latch, liberty

INTRODUCTION

Women studies and feministic ideologies have been given a fillip among the various issues that encircle the women of modern days. Though much has been said and deliberated upon, the desired outcome goes even more elusive and evading. The gender disparity and the treatment meted out to the women folk in the so-called civilized society has still been discriminating and disgusting. The need for the emancipation and empowerment of women is acutely felt as an immediate necessity to bring women on par with men.

International forums, Media, conferences on the various issues of women focus that women have ceased to be the guardians of hearth, bending over the cradle but have accepted challenging roles as much as the stamp of her time, environment and her upbringing would allow her. She is recusant not because of Elian Showalter, or Kate Millet but because of the status she maintains from time immemorial. Still, the 'yet remaining' shackles like patriarchy that rules the social system considers women as soubrette, impedes her from

breathing the air of freedom. Hence there arises a need to empower her intellectually, emotionally and socially.

Empowerment of Women

Women empowerment is visualized as an enabling process which begins in the mind, from a woman's consciousness, from her very beliefs about herself and her rights, having an awareness of how gender as well as other socio-economic political forces is acting on her. Hence empowerment is a process of social transformation, not a product. A woman becomes empowered through knowledge, awareness, participation and autonomy. The basic objective of women empowerment does not only understand one's potential for self development, but also channelizes the same for the benefit of the society as a whole.

Vijay Tendulkar, an 'avant-garde' playwright of the Indian theatre is interested in showing the disharmony rather than harmony in the relationship between an individual and the society. His play Silence! The court is in session explores the exploitation and oppression of a woman by her father, brother, uncle and fellow companions. Feudal values are thoroughly grounded in Indian society and women often become the victims of the male dominated society as the feudal lords try their best to preserve and perpetuate the oppressive ways of life. If one rebels against it, the voice of protest is drowned in the noisy cries of the so-called upholders of morality.

Profile of Benare and Her Co-Artists

The protagonist of Silence! The court is in Session, Leela Benare is a sprightly rebellious and assertive school teacher. She possesses a natural lust for life and a spontaneous vitality. She is conscientious in her work and commands her love and respect of all her pupils. As an enlightened activist, she became a member of the amateur theatre group. The theatre group is a miniscule cross-section of middle-class society, the members, representative of its different sub-strata. Their characters, dialogues, gestures, and even mannerisms reflect their petty, circumscribed existences. Frustrated and angry as they are in their individual lives, they go to the extent of maligning their companions also, for they are malicious and jealous in their attitude towards their fellow beings.

Double Standards

The amateur actors gather in a village hall to stage a play entitled "The Trial of President Lyndon B. Johnson." As they had ample time before the actual performance, all the artists plan to have a mock trial. Under the guise of staging a mock trial, the members of the troupe have a vague suspicion of Benare's relationship with Professor Damle, a member of the troupe. She is easily isolated and made a victim of the cruel game cunningly planned by her troupe members. They forcibly make her play the part of the accused and drag the skeletons in her cupboard and damage her psyche beyond repair. She is charged with infanticide and unwed motherhood. According to the court she has tarnished motherhood and tried to destroy the social traditions and customs. If she is allowed to carry the symbol of her fornication, the institution of marriage will be torpedoed and it will send wrong signals to women and encourage them to emulate the dissolute conduct of Miss Benare. The mock trial which is carried through a light-hearted atmosphere in the beginning slowly becomes surcharged with cynicism, pettiness and sadism by exposing the private life of the accused pinning her down in the name of social justice and moral code. No cross examination is

attempted by the defence-lawyer. Based on the fictitious stories and scandals, the court pronounces that she shall live but the child in her womb to be destroyed. She tries to establish the truth that she has been victimized by the society in which men rule the roost and she does not deserve such a severe punishment. It is ironical that while the court chooses to punish Benare, it lets Prof. Damle, her accomplice, scot free. Not even a passing criticism against his act of adultery is made in the court. It is a baiting of an isolated woman by a pack of wolves that are die hard chauvinists, phony guardian angels and the pseudo conscience-keepers of the society. She understands what started as a harmless game is unleashing venom with a view of belittling her both as a woman and as a teacher. In fact, the dramatic element of the play 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. Unable to bear the mock trial any longer, she rushes to the door and tries to lift the latch. To her horror, She finds the door locked from outside. She wants to run away from the hall but there is no one outside to open it. Thus she is forced to remain with those who have ganged up on her and the claustrophobic atmosphere created a psychological crisis in her. The latch symbolizes the traditions, conventions of the Indian society confined by social hypocrisy and its dubious double standards.

Clarion Call for Liberty

The obstinate latch which hurts her at the beginning of the play assumes symbolic magnitude as it seals the room from the rest of the world and Benare from liberty. The latch symbolizes how an Indian woman is governed by the power of man, conventions, social norms, domination and male chauvinism. It is a symbolic suppression and exploitation. It becomes a great barrier as it restricts her from making a bid for freedom, breaking the mould that envelops her. The latch which draws up a drop of blood from her finger becomes responsible for the mortal wound and the terrible blow that the others give her, leaving her cornered and mentally drained of life. When the latch gives way, there is an overflow of emotions, seething passions, unrestricted and unbridled, which causes damage to the individual and ultimately to the society. Society regards Benare as an erotic symbol of desire, as an object of entertainment. But within herself she has immense power and the recognition of power gives her maturity. She raises several questions about love, sex, marriage and established moral values. Though women like Benare are economically independent, still they have to lift up so many latches to enjoy liberty. Benare is portrayed as a revolutionary type, a challenge to the androcentric society. It is a beginning for women’s liberation, and assertion, an end for man’s power and supremacy. Women like Benare fight for their space and place in life, irrespective of the outcome. They refuse to be the holy doormats that the self-imposed culture custodians would expect them to be. This quality of fighting retains one’s individuality, refusing to succumb to societal conditioning. It can only be the true empowerment of women. ‘Lifting up the latch’ refers to her emancipation from the male dominated world of clutches and barriers.

CONCLUSION

The play drives home the idea that neither there is any sin nor any goodness in the society around Benare. Tendulkar treats the character of Benare with great compassion and understanding while pitting her against the men who are selfish, hypocritical and brutally ambitious. Man should disown the established norms and values and move towards a new

ABHINAV

NATIONAL MONTHLY REFEREED JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN ARTS & EDUCATION

www.abhinavjournal.com

humanitarian order. What is important in life is one's feeling, one's sincerity or integrity, if the life lived is authentic.

REFERENCES

1. Beauvoir, Simon de. The Second Sex, New York: Vintage, 1989.
2. Iyengar, K.R.S. Indian Writing in English, New Delhi: Sterling, 2002.
3. Tendulkar, Vijay. Silence! The Court is in Session, Madras: Oxford University Press, 1979.
4. Wadikar, Shailaja B. Vijay Tendulkar : A Pioneer Playwright, New Delhi:
5. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (p) Ltd., 2013.