

Trauma and Transition in the play, Silence! The Court is in Session by Vijay Tendulkar

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Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar's Silence! The Court is in Session is a compelling exploration of trauma and resilience. The research paper focuses on Leela Benare, the central character of the play, a woman whose seemingly light-hearted life is shattered by a series of traumatic experiences. An ostensibly harmless mock trial becomes a catalyst for public humiliation, exposing Benare's vulnerabilities and forcing her to confront deep-seated traumas. Betrayal, humiliation, and isolation serve as the crucible in which Benare's character is forged. Despite the emotional turmoil, Benare's journey has a remarkable transformation. She rises above the ashes of oppression, defying societal expectations and embracing self-discovery. The play's ending offers a glimmer of hope, suggesting that even the most painful experiences can lead to personal transitional growth.

Keywords: Trauma, Transition, Resilience, Humiliation, Self-Discovery, Patriarchy

Vijay Tendulkar's powerful play, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, is not just a courtroom drama; it is a crucible of resilience. A seemingly light-hearted mock trial by amateur actors takes a dark turn, revealing the deep-seated societal prejudices and the protagonist, Leela Benare's buried traumas. Tendulkar does not shy away from depicting the searing sting of public humiliation and the suffocating isolation Benare faces. However, within this crucible, something remarkable ignites: a spark of defiance and a profound journey of self-discovery. Benare's transition is not simply about surviving; it is about rising above the ashes of oppression and injustice, a testament to the indomitable human spirit.

Betrayal becomes the major cause of the trauma experienced by the protagonist. At the age of fifteen, Benare falls in love with her maternal uncle and wishes to get married, believing it would lead to a beautiful life. However, her uncle runs away like a coward, and her mother does not support her either. "The true opponent of a suffering woman in society is not only the social forbidden traditions, customs, rites and male prejudice, but also the unresponsive and cold dealing of a woman with other woman" (Purohit 2). The statement introduces the broader societal context, highlighting that women face oppression not only from men but also from other women." All of them – my

mother too – were against it. And my brave man turned tail and ran” (Tendulkar 88). The rejection throws her into mental agony, leading to a suicide attempt. “I threw myself off a parapet of our house – to embrace death, but I didn’t die” (88). As a grown-up woman, she attempts to find solace again through love, having a premarital affair with Professor Damle. However, the relationship ends in disappointment. She becomes pregnant with Damle’s child, but he abandons her, claiming he cannot help. Leela Benare indirectly mentions it while speaking to Samant, stating, “But when there’s a reallife problem, away he runs! Hides his head. He’s not here today. He won’t be coming. He wouldn’t dare” (22). Benare’s experiences are evidences of an enduring human spirit. The scars of betrayal may be etched deep, but they don’t define her. Instead, they shape her into a woman of strength and resilience, a woman who refuses to be silenced.

The play explodes through the mock trial, subjecting Leela Benare to public humiliation. Here, *“Benare who is known for her uncompromising spirit of independence and natural gusto for life has been inhumanly treated as an accused in the chauvinistic court of law. She has to undergo agonizing torture and psychological trauma for challenging the scornful and cynical social norms and modes of behaviour.”* (Joseph 32).

Her colleagues accuse her of a fabricated infanticide case to expose her real life and vulnerabilities. The play portrays the constant urge to victimize Leela Benare. Everyone possesses bits and pieces of her personal life, which they use as weapons. Ponshe exemplifies this by stating, “I’ve got something to tell you, too. About Miss Benare” (Tendulkar 36). Initially, the accusations don’t faze her. However, the situation takes a turn when details from a book Samant reads dovetail with Benare’s real life, particularly her relationship with Professor Damle. The patriarchal society throws stones at her through hateful words, with Kashikar calling her “a sinful canker on the body of society” (82). Their words become weapons, inflicting deep emotional wounds.

Leela Benare stands in a chilling paradox. Surrounded by colleagues, she feels a profound isolation, a hollowness where empathy should reside. Even Samant, a potential source of understanding, remains a silent observer and his neutrality becomes a deafening absence of support. The air crackles with the sting of their mental cruelty, a relentless assault she initially endures in stoic silence. Yet, within this desolate landscape, a seed of defiance begins to sprout.

Benare’s initial silence isn’t a surrender, but a strategic pause. It’s the measured breath before a warrior takes a stand. In the face of this loveless tribunal, she discovers a reservoir of resilience she never knew she possessed. Though the isolation is painful, it becomes a catalyst, igniting a deeper connection with her inner strength. Unburdened by the need for external validation, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery. Her eventual rebellion, though seemingly weak in the moment, is a spark that ignites a fire within. It’s a lone voice rising above the cacophony of apathy, a testament to the indomitable human spirit. Benare’s journey reminds us that isolation, while daunting, can be a catalyst for profound transition. It’s in the quiet solitude that we discover the depths of our own strength, the seeds of resilience waiting to blossom into something extraordinary.

Leela Benare is an enigma. At first glance, she appears jovial, engaging in playful banter with Samant and readily mocking others. This light-heartedness could be mistaken for frivolity, but it’s more likely a carefully crafted mask. It’s a shield, perhaps, to deflect from the inner turmoil simmering beneath the surface. Even when faced with the initial accusations of the mock trial, Benare maintains a facade of calmness. The gravity of the situation seems to wash over her initially. However, as the charade unravels and her past is exposed, a shift occurs. The stage directions “Benare has stiffened” and “Benare is tensed now” – (53) become a physical manifestation of the emotional armour cracking. This isn’t a surrender, but a moment of vulnerability, a glimpse of the fire that burns within. Leela’s initial demeanour isn’t a weakness; it’s a testament to her strength. It’s the carefully curated persona she needs to navigate a world that has repeatedly failed her. The mask may falter, but the fire within continues to burn, waiting to be unleashed.

“Patriarchs view independent, empowered women with voice, a direct threat to patriarchal social structure, and they take every measure to drown out their voices” (Roy 3). The patriarchal societies often view independent women as a challenge to their authority and will go to great lengths to silence them. This can have serious consequences for women, limiting their opportunities, restricting their freedoms, and perpetuating gender inequality. Analysing Leela Benare’s journey in *Silence! The Court is in Session* reveals a complex transition, not a clear-cut shift from shattered to unstoppable. There’s a limited voice found in defiance. While initially tolerant, Benare eventually yells back in self-defence. However, the play suggests this might be futile. The others seem unwilling to listen, and the environment remains oppressive. A potential moment of defiance exists. When the accusations hit a personal nerve, Benare throws off her mask and attempts to defend herself. The freeze scene could be interpreted as a flicker of defiance against the societal expectations and cruelty she faces.

The play’s ending leaves Benare’s future ambiguous. The play’s brilliance lies in this ambiguity. It doesn’t offer a clear victory over oppression. Instead, it portrays the struggle for voice within a restrictive environment. At first, she thought to escape from the trauma by harming herself or committing suicide, but finally she comes to a realisation that she has to lead her life for her child. “I want my body now for him – for him alone” (Tendulkar 89). By showcasing Benare’s initial defiance, the play leaves a glimmer of hope that her spirit isn’t entirely broken. Whether she becomes unstoppable or not is left to the audience’s interpretation.

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, trauma becomes the crucible that forges Leela Benare’s potential for transition. Much like an eagle undergoing its painful moulting, the trial scene strips Benare bare, exposing her vulnerabilities and forcing her to confront her past. The process, though agonizing, could be the catalyst for a powerful rebirth. The trauma may lead Benare through a series of stages: realisation, acceptance, and ultimately, purgation (purification). As her personal life is laid bare, she’s undoubtedly caged in psychological trauma. However, this very exposure could pave the way for self-discovery. By accepting her reality, she sheds the burdens of the past, purging herself and creating space for a new beginning. While Vijay Tendulkar leaves the ending ambiguous, this very ambiguity becomes a source of hope. The audience is invited to imagine Benare’s future, a future where her newfound self-awareness empowers her to rise above the limitations imposed by society. Perhaps, like the eagle with its renewed feathers and beak, Benare will emerge stronger, ready to soar above the challenges that await. The play’s true victory lies not in a definitive triumph, but in the possibility of transition. It reminds us that even the most painful experiences can be stepping stones to growth and resilience.

Benare’s journey serves as an inspiration, urging us to view trauma not as a dead end, but as a potential catalyst for a stronger, more authentic self. Leela Benare is not just a fictional character. Her story resonates with the experiences of many real-life individuals, like the famous personality Monica Lewinsky, who faced public scrutiny and personal challenges after a high-profile scandal. Monica’s final statement in an article says, “No longer. It’s time to burn the beret and bury the blue dress. And move forward.” Her decision to move forward and embrace her own narrative echoes Benare’s resilience and determination.

Oscar Wilde’s quote, “Every Saint has a past and every sinner has a future,” reinforces the theme of redemption and the possibility of overcoming past traumas. Benare’s journey and Lewinsky’s experiences remind us that even in the face of adversity, individuals can find strength, healing, and a brighter future. Benare’s story serves as a testament to the human spirit’s resilience, reminding us that adversity can be a catalyst for transition.

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