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## Power and Politics in Select Plays of Vijay Tendulkar

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *This research paper examines the dynamics of power and politics in Vijay Tendulkar's Kamala and Silence! The Court is in Session. Kamala dissects the numerous ways patriarchy manifests, impacting not only the titular character, Kamala, but also the seemingly 'privileged' wife, Sarita. While Silence! The Court is in Session exposes the pervasive nature of patriarchal power through its portrayal of a mock trial against Leela Benare.*

**Methodology:** *A close reading of the plays will be conducted to identify key themes and narrative techniques. The analysis will examine how gender roles are constructed and challenged within the plays*

**Outcome:** *Vijay Tendulkar has skillfully portrayed the dynamics of patriarchal power and politics, which aim to suppress women. He has given readers a platform to discuss this issue of oppression.*

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** *His plays, Kamala and Silence! The Court is in Session, aim to dismantle the patriarchal mindset of the people. With these works of Tendulkar in consideration, other works of contemporary writers can be studied and analyzed to dissect the power dynamics and politics dictating the lives of the oppressed.*

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Vijay Tendulkar is a renowned personality in the Indian Marathi Theatre. With prior experience in the field of journalism, he initially authored short stories. However, after noticing they included more dialogues than narrative, he shifted to one-act plays. Progressively, he began writing full-length plays. Apart from the writing medium, Tendulkar wrote scripts for films through which he encouraged studies of violence and power dynamics prevailing in Indian reality. Tendulkar, additionally, countered the 'art for art's sake' notion of drama with his social commentary on the issues prevalent in Indian society. In 1984, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan award and in 1998, he was a recipient of the 'Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship' for his 'lifetime contribution' to the Marathi theatre and literature.

Tendulkar wrote thirty plays in Marathi, and ten of his plays were translated into English. These plays depict the notions of man-woman relationships, the machination of power, and physical and verbal violence in different forms. *Kanyadaan* is one of his most complex plays where Jyoti becomes a subject to her husband, Arun's, sadistic desire to avenge the atrocities his ancestors had to face through the ages. *The Vultures* is a dissection of human nature as Tendulkar navigates through the distorted relationship between Rama and Ramakant and the greedy and lustful Pitale family. Furthermore, Tendulkar delves into the machination of power, and how a person resorts to gain power and authority. *Ghashiram Kotwal* traces the dynamic of power in a hierarchal manner where Gauri, Ghashiram's daughter, is used by him to achieve the Kotwalship. In turn, Ghashiram is used by Nana to exercise his control over Poona. *Encounter in Umbugland* captures a person's transformation as he/she achieves power. The play traces the evolution of a mischievous princess Vijaya into an ambitious dictator. Lastly, as a realistic writer, Tendulkar chose to visually represent the violence instead of reporting it. He wanted to depict the harshness of human nature in his plays. Sakharam in *Sakharam Binder* exploits destitute women in the guise of providing shelter. From beating Laxmi to murdering Champa, the play traces the diverse types of domestic abuse prevalent in the society.

Derived from the ancient Greek word patriarchs, patriarchy refers to a society where power and control are passed down to the older males from generation to generation. Its manifestation may vary due to various factors, including culture, religion, and tools such as movies, television, and politics. One of the trademark notions associated with patriarchy is gender roles.

As Judith Butler argues in her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, sex is a biological construct and, thus, comes first, whereas gender is imposed on top of the natural construct. This distinction between male and female is constructed by society. Later in *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet states that women's subjugation stems from a patriarchal gender structure. This philosophy fails to integrate women into the mainstream. The system aims to control and define women through a variety of means, including economic reliance, limited reproductive rights, and restrictions on personal growth.

There is a misconception associated with the notion of patriarchy, which claims that it only affects women. However, the reality is contradicting as men suffer from this social disease. As Bell Hooks mentions in her essay, *Understanding Patriarchy*, both men and women must follow a 'predetermined, gendered script' where the men should disconnect from their emotions, put up a brave front and shoulder the burdens of the family. In contrast, women must be submissive and docile and nurture the family. However, it is always overlooked that patriarchy is one of the biggest threats to men's mental and physical health. There is endless pressure for men to adhere to the narrow prescription of masculinity and to prove their manhood by compromising their individuality and humanity. There is a constant gnawing of the question, 'What is to be a man?' A boy is always handed a gun or a car as a toy and never a kitchen play set. A boy who acts in a feminine way is frowned upon by society. This exclusion confines them in tiny boxes that restrict the way they want to be. One is reminded of Mahesh Dattani's statement from *Dance Like a Man*, "A woman in men's world is progressive, but a man in women's world is pathetic." (Dattani, 427) There is a repression of feelings, difficulty in making connections and the glorification of violence even if men are among the victims of patriarchy. From aggressive sports culture to the glorifying of violence in media geared at men, the identification of masculinity with aggression produces an ongoing push to conform.

Furthermore, women have always been on the more disadvantaged end of the scale of patriarchy. The fault again lies in the 'predetermined gendered script'. The society wants them to be obedient and sacrificial. The social disease of

patriarchy has led to numerous cases of humiliation, torture, and exploitation. There have been several episodes of rape, dowry, domestic violence, female infanticide, and foeticide due to the mentality of the society that men are superior to women. One of the striking manifestations of patriarchy lies in the stigma faced by women who do not wish to marry or have children. Women who deviate from such conventional gendered roles face social pressure and invalidation. Women face economic as well as educational exploitation. Despite carrying the two-thirds of the burden of the world's work, they are paid only a tenth of the world's income. The society chooses the education of boys over girls just because it wants them to conform to the roles it has assigned to them. Societal norms and customs frequently privilege the male perspective, resulting in a social climate in which women must continuously traverse limits and struggle for equal rights.

Psychotherapist John Bradshaw considers blind obedience of the gender roles to be the foundation upon which the entire notion of patriarchy stands. Dismantling this patriarchal structure requires the cooperation of both men and women. It cannot happen as long as the society continues living in a collective denial. As a playwright of distinction and remarkable artistry, Vijay Tendulkar portrays women's plight in the Indian scenario with fantastic precision and accuracy. One of the few concerns that disrupts harmony in a family or society is patriarchal hegemony, which supports men's dominant societal position while subordinating women's positions. This has resulted in discrepancies, dislocations, dissatisfaction, and discomfort. In patriarchal societies, women are often portrayed as 'mother earth', 'goddess', 'child bearer', or 'matriarch'. She is vulnerable to man's authority; thus, he uses patriarchal dominance to make her a victim. The female characters in his plays are depicted as the subjects of gender politics and violence. And one may detect the depiction of gender power struggles in his plays. Tendulkar avoids conventional victim tales. His female characters are complicated and multifaceted, as they deal with the pressure to conform to societal expectations while possessing tenacity and a quest for individuality. He explores the psychological effects of patriarchy on both men and women. He brings out the twisted perception of masculinity, which results in inner turmoil and aggression.

Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* depicts Leela Benare's dreadful situation and the underlying mental and spiritual violence that can be sensed from within, despite the veneer of pity. In the play, Benare, the protagonist, is victimized by patriarchy and subjected to humiliating cross-examination in court. This leads to frustration. *Kamala* is a realistic play that depicts the status of women in traditional Indian society in unique ways. Kamala, a victim of flesh business, and Sarita, Jaisingh Jadhav's wife, both feel like slaves in their manner. In the play, both characters, one illiterate and one well-educated, are exploited and unable to resist patriarchal society. Tendulkar's plays highlight patriarchy's insidious nature while paving the ground for dialogue and action through their multi-layered narratives. He masterfully uses literature to give voice to the voiceless and raise a platform for the readers and audience to raise questions and work upon the hurdles in the progressive future.

Composed in 1981, *Kamala* is a two-act play exposing the vicious flesh trade which commodifies women for the greed of fame and power by the patriarchal society. The play revolves around Kamala, a young woman pushed into the flesh trade and purchased by Jaisingh, a journalist. Jaisingh claims to be "saving" Kamala by removing her from the trade, but his motivations are unclear. He controls her clothing, behaviour, and even her thinking. On the other hand, Sarita has to live through the limits set upon her by her husband and society. Despite appearing to be more privileged than Kamala, Sarita is subjected to Jaisingh's manipulation and control, demonstrating the universality of patriarchal tyranny. *Kamala* was inspired by a true story of a journalist who bids for a girl, to expose the flesh trade.

Empathy, affection, understanding, and reciprocity are anticipated from both sides in the man-woman connection, which serves as the foundation of society. However, a cooperative partnership can devolve into power struggles when the man attempts to dominate the woman. Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* incorporates the universal issue of subjugation of women in Indian society. The play demonstrates the power imbalance experienced in human relationships. Jaisingh Jadhav, a journalist, is married to Sarita, who belongs to an educated

aristocratic family. In the materialistic aspect, the house does not lack luxuries and amenities, implying their happy married life. However, the husband's selfish and ambitious attitude makes their married life disoriented. Jaisingh exercises absolute control over his wife, Sarita. He is a true product of the patriarchy. He demonstrates socially acceptable masculine traits such as ambition, aggression, assertiveness, insensitivity, and individuality. He becomes rude and violent when she retaliates his sexual demands. He wants his works to be obeyed like a law as he tells her authoritatively. The playwright's portrayal of Jaisingh highlights how Indian men have internalized the demand for authority, especially when dealing with women. The drama highlights that marriage is founded on power dynamics, not love. Sarita feels shackled in her marriage because her husband's dominance has erased her individuality. She has learnt to suppress her desire to work for Jaisingh on command.

In the play, Jaisingh considers sex as a marital right and Sarita cannot withhold it from him. Sarita embodies the concept of 'Pativrata Aryastree,' she is a religious and devoted wife and housekeeper. She is what her husband's friend calls her, a 'lovely, bonded labourer' who provides domestic comfort, sexual pleasure, and social companionship. Jaisingh's indifferent behaviour is visible in the incident when he, without any resistance, books tickets to her maternal home when she tells him that she has decided to go back. This suggests that to Jaisingh, Sarita is nothing more than someone who satiates his sexual desires. The turning point of their marital life comes with the arrival of Kamala, a tribal woman bought by Jaisingh under the guise of 'saving' her. Rather than feeling envious or threatened by her presence, Sarita is compassionate towards Kamala. Her noble character is revealed when she presents her concern regarding Kamala's ragged appearance at the press conference: "She is a woman, after all. And her sari is torn." (Tendulkar, 21) However, Jaisingh does not heed her worries as he thinks that her 'natural' look would only maintain the hype of the conference. Sarita's compassion towards Kamala is fruitful as, through her conversation with the latter, she realises her servile position in the household: "How much did he buy you for?" (Tendulkar 34). It is, then, that she realises that she is nothing more than

a mere commodity bought along with dowry. Both women are transactions made by men to suit their needs. Kamala's arrival works in her favour. She now recognizes power dynamics at all levels despite previously just experiencing them in her home environment. Once the torch of realisation is lighted, the rebellion takes place. Sarita's mindset transforms blind obedience to determination.

Apart from Sarita, Kamala is equally victimized by Jaisingh's greed for fame. The cost at which Jaisingh bought her highlights a woman's position in society. Jaisingh proudly boasts that he bought her for just two hundred and fifty rupees: "Even a bullock cost more than that. I bought her cheap." (Tendulkar, 14) Being a woman and a tribal, Kamala faces double marginalisation by the hostile world. She is a victim of men's greed, lust, and ambition. They might buy her for personal or professional reasons. Jaisingh claims to have a humanitarian motive for purchasing her, but in truth, she serves as a tool to advance his career by providing evidence of a horrible behaviour that no one else in his industry can. Jaisingh shows no sympathy towards her. For him, her torn clothes hold a higher priority than her dignity. The dramatist criticizes the exploitative nature of authority, particularly in the context of flashy journalism. At the press conference, Kamala receives no sympathy or understanding from journalists. Instead, she becomes the focus of masculine sexual gaze. The press conference participants represent male spectators who enjoy watching women, even when they are mistreated. To them, Kamala is just a 'tamasha.' The questions asked of her are unpleasant, awkward, demeaning, and embarrassing, but the men seem unconcerned about her situation. After Jaisingh is done with using her, he plans to end her to 'Nari-Niketan.' This highlights the hypocrisy, shamelessness, and vulgarity of the patriarchal system, where men hold power, and women have no say. Once, realization dawns upon Sarita, she is fuelled with courage to face and upturn the patriarchal society. She questions the actions and behaviour of Jaisingh when she converses with Kakasaheb:

Sarita: Why? Why can't men limp behind? Why aren't women ever the masters? Why can't women at least ask to live her life the same way as a

man? Why must only a man have the right to be a man? Does he have one extra sense? A woman can do everything a man can.

Kakasaheb: but that isn't manhood. (Tendulkar, 47)

Kakasaheb's response highlights the extent to which the patriarchy has been internalised by the society. He further even admits that he is not any different from Jaisingh:

"I too was just like this. Don't go by what I seem to be today. I gave your aunt a lot of trouble. As if it was my right." (Tendulkar, 47)

With her epiphanic moment, Sarita embarks on a journey of introspection and self-discovery of her identity. The play *Kamala* depicts that although a wife provides companionship to her husband, she is bereft of the same rights as him. The man will remain superior, and the woman will be the 'absolute other' to him. *Kamala* transcends the narrative of a trafficked woman. It paints a bone-chilling picture of a male-dominated society which dictates the lives of women. The dramatist has unveiled the commodification, manipulation, and internalization of the control plaguing society. Jaisingh has been portrayed as a dominant person who dictates Kamala and Sarita in the guise of security and marriage. Marriage becomes a microcosm of power and politics. The power dynamics lie in the economic dependence, societal expectations, and control of sexuality, which is visible in Jaisingh's treatment of Sarita. Jaisingh's self-proclaimed "saving" Kamala raises the question of whether his act is just an embodiment of a controlling male figure. The drama delves deeper, examining the psychological effects of patriarchy on both Kamala and Sarita. Jaisingh subtly manipulates both women into feeling helpless and useless. Through this play, Vijay Tendulkar opens the readers' eyes to both the flesh trade and the subjugation of women who are deprived of their autonomy.

Vijay Tendulkar wrote *Silence! The Court was in Session (Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe)* in 1963. This social drama relies on a mock trial to satirise the hypocritical nature of the patriarchal society. With the backdrop of a village hall, the play revolves around a group of amateur theatre artists, the "Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association's Mock Lawcourt," who improvise



a mock trial, which is a last-minute deviation from their planned script. This improvisation presents the victim, Lella Benare in the centre. What began as a pretend play turned into an accusatory performance as the trial emerged due to Benare's out-of-wedlock child. The trial's premise, infanticide for existing outside of marriage, sets the play's central theme: patriarchy's totalitarian grasp on women's lives. The defence attorney, Sukhatme, acts as a mouthpiece to the societal expectations, emphasizing the "shame" of her pregnancy. The judge, Kashikar, personifies the patriarchal figurehead who wields authority over tradition. The entire trial is a sham put up to ostracise Benare for going against the predetermined societal norms.

*Silence! The Court Is in Session* is set against the backdrop of mid-1900s India, an era when the society witnessed the emergence of working women. However, a major portion of the public upheld traditional gender views- men being breadwinners for the families and women being the nurturers. This satirical play consists of only two female characters- Leela Benare, a single teacher with an independent spirit and Mrs Kashikar, a married woman in her middle age. The two characters contrast by representing the progressive lifestyle and traditional norms. With the backdrop of the 1960s, the play depicts a society which was hesitant to accept women like Benare, who protested the shackled conventional society with her progressive mindset.

The conservative cast intentionally brings up the importance of motherhood to shame Benare for her actions and decisions. While their praise for motherhood appears to be celebratory, it is an indirect declaration for the women to conform to the prescribed role by society. Sukhatma, a real-life lawyer, claims motherhood to be sacred and pure and that "our culture enjoins us to the perpetual worship" (Tendulkar, 79). He adds that mothers must assemble a magic circle with their entire being to protect their little ones. What is more, Kashikar, the judge of the mock trial, recites a poetry: "Mother and / The Motherland, / Both are even / Higher than heaven." (Tendulkar, 79) In the guise of praise as a divine entity, a mother is stripped of her individuality and free will to live an independent life – a life that goes against the shackles of the traditional society.

Her real-life situation earns her a jab from Sukhatme, who claims that Benare “has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood.” (Tendulkar, 114) In addition to this, her ‘crime’ is exaggerated by her decision to raise the child. Rest of the characters consider Benare as a subversion of tradition and criticize her acting out of the “moral conduct of a normal unmarried woman.” (Tendulkar, 81) If women start having children without marriage, then society is more concerned with men’s authority and its reinforcement than women’s will and individuality. This has been the case since time immemorial.

The play further brings up frequent discussions on women’s bodies. The male cast constantly disrespects Benare’s autonomy over her body and takes it upon themselves to pass the verdict for her alleged ‘crime.’ Benare expresses her wish to raise her child as she pours out her wishes for her child in her monologue: “He must have a mother... a father to call his own- a house- to be looked after- he must have a good name.” (Tendulkar 118) However, the men around her want to deprive her of one thing: women are respected for their ability to give birth. Benare also expresses her frustration and anger over the fact that a woman’s body is treated as a domain of men, and they can use her as they wish and dispose of her after satisfaction. She screams: “Only one thing in life is all-important- the body! You may deny it, but it is true.” (Tendulkar, 117) When Kashikar gives her time to speak for herself, she pours out all her resentment and frustration pent up in her. She mentions the issue of her child’s father, Professor Damle. She wished that her relationship with him would be different, but she only faced disappointment. She states: “He didn't want my mind or my devotion. He didn't care about them. He wasn't a god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! Again, the body!” (Tendulkar, 117) Feminine autonomy and independence disrupted by the shackles of the patriarchy is evident in Sukhatme’s orthodox dialogue, “Woman is not fit for independence... That is the rule laid down for us by tradition. Abiding by this rule, I make a powerful plea... Miss Benare is not fit for independence.” (Tendulkar, 115)

Benare has been charged just for breaking out of the societal norms and refusing to depend on anyone but herself. She wishes to raise her child out-of-

wedlock; however, society is labelling that decision as a ‘crime,’ a crime more heinous than infanticide. This notion is brought up through Sukhatme's views: “Infanticide is a dreadful act, but bringing up the child of an illegal union is certainly more horrifying.” (Tendulkar, 115) By the end of the play, everything goes back to ‘normal,’ as the cast breaks their character and asserts that the entire trial is just a game. However, the same cannot be said for Benare as she lies motionless on the ground. One can find the scratches of mental and spiritual violence in her vulnerable state. While the cast might think of the trial as a game, Tendulkar aims to treat the play as a revelation for the readers and audience.

Vijay Tendulkar portrays the dominance of the male gaze and female subjugation through the satirical treatment of the plot. Tendulkar's play criticizes patriarchy's tendency to demonstrate dominance and superiority over women in response to dissatisfaction. The framework of this mock trial brings out the misogynistic and sadistic characteristics of the male-centric culture. The very accusation against Benare highlights society's need to punish women for protesting societal norms while ignoring that men play a part in creating such situations. The harsh verdict of abortion exemplifies the extreme extent to which men will go to control women's bodies and wills.

Society has established the fact that men are superior to women and possess social, political, and financial power to dominate and dictate their lives. This power is the main attribute of patriarchy, which justifies the violence and exploitation women go through. The institutions like family, education, media, and religion have a hand in internalizing and encouraging male-centric ideology in society. Since the inception of mankind, women have been the victims of this male-centric ideology, which is true. However, this victimization cannot be limited to one gender, as men equally suffer from this toxic mindset—the constant pressure to conform to the societal expectation of male standards results in their crippling mental health. There have been several incidents where men have been bereft of independent choices. Moving onto women as victims of patriarchy, it has been witnessed throughout history that men have gone to various extents to dictate their lives. While violence has been a go-to method to reinforce

dominance, the ideology has been internalized through upbringing. Women have always been attributed to the roles of nurturing in the family. The private sphere of home and family is the female domain.

Vijay Tendulkar, a well-known Marathi playwright, uses his words to voice his concerns for women's subjugation and the defragmentation of society. His plays, *Kamala* and *Silence! The Court is in Session*, aiming to dismantle the patriarchal mindset of the people. *Kamala* delves into the issue of oppression of women of different strata- tribals, different relations- wives and the exploitation of the media to assert dominance. While *Kamala* faces this humiliation due to being an indigenous woman, *Sarita* is not exempted from *Jaisingh's* manipulation. She never has been treated as a proper wife. Instead as *Kamala* insinuates, she is a slave who must satisfy her 'master's' needs and obey his words like law. Moving on, *Silence! The Court is in Session; Tendulkar has thrown light upon the extent to which men can go to suppress women's desires and the traditional image of a mother*. While *Benare* has been accused of illegitimate pregnancy and must face the charges of infanticide, *Professor Damale* is not held accountable. *Kashikar* and *Sukhatme* constantly bring up the notion of motherhood and its purity. *Tendulkar* has used the mock trial to expose the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society where men dressed as advocators of justice are not delivering proper justice. Through the plays *Kamala* and *Silence! The Court is in Session*; this research paper aims to reveal the detrimental impact of patriarchy not only on women but also on men. It highlights the need to generate awareness to address this social disease that is one of the reasons for inequality between genders.

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