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The Ambivalence of Hybridity : A study of Vijay Tedulkar's protagonist in Silence! The Court is in Session

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to analyze the female protagonists of Vijay Tendulkar's play Silence! The Court is in Session in the context of Postcolonial theory of hybridity propounded by Homi K Bhabha. His theoretical statements are based on fundamental concepts of liminality, hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence. The ambivalence resulted from the cross-cultural encounter is also experienced by the people of the colonized nation. In the era of globalization and liberalization, the concept of culture and its values has undergone some drastic changes. The paper throws light on the personality traits and psychological dilemma faced by the protagonists due to the inborn cultural values and those of western values. Contemporary Indian drama is rich in explorations of cultural hybridity in its various dimensions. Vijay Tendulkar, the prominent and influenced dramatist of the time is often discussed and criticized for creating complex characters. The paper tries to discuss the model of 'hybrid identity' and 'fragmented identity'.

Keywords : Postcolonial, hybridity, ambivalence, liminality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Post Colonial critics have given new concept of 'cultural hybridity' in which can be discussed from a range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Chiefly it can be viewed in the context of cultural encounters, interferences and exchanges in the era of globalization. The new concepts of cultural hybridity, ambivalence, third space and mimicry owes their origin to the works of Homi Bhabha namely, *Nation and Narration* and *The Location of Culture* In his theories concerning Postcolonialism, Bhabha is highly influenced by Foucault, Derrida, Edward Said, Lacan and Satre. His theoretical statements are based on fundamental concepts of liminality, hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence. He analyses the works of Morrison, Walter, Rushdie and Conard from the view point of the colonized and how they try to reveal the power of resistance of the same. Bhabha views colonialism as an ongoing process as he believes that the histories and cultures of colonialism still influence the culture of the colonized. Postcolonialism has given the power to the colonized to resist and this has enabled them to create something new. Bhabha defines culture from the deconstructionist approach and views it as a product of another culture. In his essay 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation' he says,

It is a mark of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy- and an apparatus of power- that it produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic. Categories, like the people, minorities or cultural difference that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity (Bhabha: 292).

Bhabha views culture as a hybrid entity because it is the amalgamation of the habits and practices of the both- the colonizers and the colonized. The culture of

Postcolonial period in any nation is bound to be ambivalent and hybridized. Even the former colony can never be considered as a singular cultural entity. Hybridization of culture produces a state of ambivalence in which people doubt their culture and habits. Ambivalence is the result of hybridity and it is one of its integral features. As hybridity basically refers to a sense of mixture, Bhabha discusses its history as the history of culture. He focuses on the cultural illustrations of hybridity in literature and bestows it a new position in Postcolonial literature. In fact in post colonial time, no nation can desire to go back to its previous indigenous cultural traditions, rather the nation needs to view the colonialism as a "cooperative venture" (Said: *xiv*).

Bhabha in his interview with Jonathan Rutherford talks about the cultural difference and its role in creating the 'third space'. He makes the clear distinction between cultural diversity and cultural differences. The concept of cultural diversity has always been accepted by all societies, where they try to accommodate it within the norms of the dominant culture, but with regards to cultural differences he states, "With the notion of cultural differences I try to place myself in the position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity of otherness" (Rutherford 209).

He also clarifies his notion of "cultural translation' and mentions that all cultures are related to one another in some way and the 'meaning is constructed across the bar of difference and separation between the signifier and the signified"(Rutherford 210). Thus, cultural hybridity results from two important concepts 'cultural difference' and 'cultural translation'. To quote, "For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' from which enables other positions to emerge" (Rutherford 210).

This model of 'hybrid identity' and 'fragmented identity' is well illustrated in the works of Indian writers. Contemporary Indian drama is rich in explorations of cultural hybridity in its various dimensions. The contemporary Indian culture, affected by liberalization and globalization witnesses the traits of cultural hybridity. The concept of culture and its value is not the traditional one; rather the acceptance of Western cultural values and manners seems very natural. Vijay Tendulkar, the prominent and influenced dramatist of the time is often discussed in the context of his creation of complex characters. His complex characters can be viewed in the multidimensional concept of postcolonial terms; hybridity, ambivalence and liminal space. N.S. Dharan notices tha

The greatest quality which Tendulkar can claim to himself as a creative writer and dramatist is his singular ability to simultaneously involve and distance himself from his creations(Dharan: 26).

The female characters in his well known play *Silence! The Court is in Session*- Miss Leela Benare and Mrs. Kashikar can be studied in the context of postcolonial theory. The issue of identity is closely associated with culture and society. They are free in a sense but their freedom is constrained by the many social and cultural factors. It means that they are both free and restricted in their speech and action. Miss Leela Benare is a modern educated Indian woman, who is aware of her rights, but at the same is also suppressed by the forces of social convention. Thus, she is torn between the her own desire of personal freedom on one hand and the constrains of traditional social norms on the other hand. She represents the contemporary Indian women who has absorbed the western concepts of freedom. Though independent and self-assertive, she is vulnerable to the pressures of traditional norms of society. Even when she seems to assert her own individual philosophy of life, she is aware of the social constrains which may prevent her to fulfill her dream of freedom. This dual attitude in

her personality makes her a complex and complicated character. She is torn between the social forces and her own notion of individuality.

The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is about amateur theatre group artists, which consists of characters from various strata of society. The group is supposed to perform an awareness raising play about the dangers of atomic warfare. The protagonist, Miss Leela Benare is a teacher by profession and she seems to have lived her life on her own terms. The other characters of the group seems hypocrite whereas Miss Benare is cheerful and carefree like a child. She tries her best to enjoy her life and work, the others consequently envy her. The group has to perform their play in the evening. As they have some time to pass before the play, Leela proposes a plan to enact a mock trial play. The rest of the members of the group find the plan as an excellent opportunity to dig up Leela's past sins- her liberal and socially unaccepted behavior. Her sin in the eyes of the society is that she was about to become an unwed mother as a result of her illicit relationship with professor Damle, amuch older and married man. Professor Damle has exploited her sexually and discarded her in the time of need, but she has no grudges against him, she says: "He wasn't god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! That's all"(118). When she was just 13, she was molested by her maternal uncle. The relationship with these two elderly persons is ambivalent and mixed of love and hatred, respect and scorn. Her infatuation with Damle reveals her ambivalent relationship with authority as such: she both scorns and reveres authority, whether it is of Damle, of the Kashikars, or of social institutions.

She is somewhere in-between the two identities; she can not accept the traditional role of the Indian women, nor does she succeed in following her desirous liberal way. Somewhere she has to make compromise. The fact that she despises the authority of the mock trail court, represented by the Kashikars and Sukhatme can not help to prevent herself from standing before them as an accused. Thus, she does both the contradictory acts- she protests as well as accepts the authority. The real accused in the case- professor Damle is called as a witness in the matter, but does not receive any punishment or even criticism from the court. Rather he appears to wield the authority of the Fruedian father figure, which Leela at once rebels against and is fascinated by. It is the same authority, embodied in Kashikar, the judge and Sukhatme, the public prosecutor that enchants and paralyses Leela when her sins are being recounted and judged.

As the play within the play unfolds, we witness the enactment of the trial. Enactment – because a real trial is not possible, since the victim has transgressed only the rules of morality and not the rules of law. But this does not mean that the enactment of the trial is just a farce, for it achieves its goal of the offender-victim's punishment and the victimisers' self-gratification. The victimisers target the victim's innocence, spontaneity and brilliance because these qualities of the victim make them feel small and inferior. In fact, we cannot fail to notice the naturalness with which all the characters perform their unplanned roles which shows how deeply ingrained and "naturalised" their prejudices are against a woman who wishes to freely choose the way she wants to live. Benare's persecutors are very natural in their self-conduct, almost childishly ignorant in their cruelty, yet they are dangerously destructive.

Leela Benare is different, and this is what makes her the target of her persecutors' rage. The wish to normalise, to eradicate any difference, to bring every individual into the herd seems to be the most powerful motive behind the mock-trial. Leela has outdone others as a teacher. And she is aware of her accomplishments as a careful teacher. " In school, when the first bell rings, my foot's already on the

threshold. I haven't heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my teaching. I'm never behindhand with my lessons! Exercises corrected on time, too! Not a bit of room for disapproval – I don't give an inch of it to anyone! (Tendulkar:57)

But one cannot fail to notice also that her extremely careful and punctual attitude towards her work indicates the internalization of an extremely powerful and demanding father figure. Her devotion to her job is an expression of her self-sacrifice at the altar of the super-ego: "But my teaching's perfect. I've put my whole life into it – I've worn myself to a shadow in this job!" (Tendulkar:58)

The play also throws light on the weapon of the popular discourses on motherhood, honour, nationalism and social responsibility but these very weapons are double-edged. As the talks and discussions on the qualities of women are supposed to empower the woman but are often used against women's interests by the people like Kashiker and Sukhatme. Women are held responsible for the dignity and honor of motherhood and through that they are supposed to preserve the ancient cultural traditions of the country. In practice, however, instead of empowering them, these discourses compromise their freedom in the name of responsibility. The vague and unjustifiable notions of morality and motherhood are used to curtail Leela Benare's freedom during the trial. Mr. Kashikar calls her a "sinful canker on the body of society" (112), these words indicate the responsibility of a woman to recover the lost purity of the nation as a woman symbolizes the mother and the mother, the nation. The most notable matter is that the violation of the ideas and institutions of social progress is expressed in the guise of preservation of national culture. In contrast to this, there is Leela Benare's vehement assertion of individuality, her defense of personal freedom and her expression of the rights of the body;

I despise this body – and I love it! I hate it – but it's all you have in the end, isn't it? It will be there. It will be yours. Where will it go without you? And where will you go if you reject it? Don't be ungrateful. It was your body that once burnt and gave you a moment so beautiful, so blissful, so near to heaven! (Tendulkar: 118)

The ambivalence and complexity of Leela's attitude to the body is duly articulated by the playwright and seems to indicate the absence of any easy solutions. Similarly, she asserts her right to give birth to her child, the product of the doomed union, and her right to live her life in her own way:

I'll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to! That can't be anyone else's business; understand? Everyone has a bent, manner, an aim in life. What's anyone else to do with these? (Tendulkar:117).

The mock-trial, thus, turns out to be an improvised performance within which various characters construct their own as well as others' identities. It becomes a kind of mirror of the society constructing identities through performances, which is obviously one of the major concerns of the play. The once exuberant Leela's reduction to a half-dead person is thus significant. The mock-trial divides Leela's life into two phases, pre-trial and post-trial. She is a confident, assertive and sensuous woman before the trial: "I say it from my own experience. Life is not meant for anyone else. It's your own life. It must be. It's a very, very important thing. Every moment, every bit of it is precious" (Tendulkar:61). But she is an altogether different woman after the mock-trial. Her attitude towards others in the group undergoes a complete change as the trial progresses. Earlier she had a mocking, jeering attitude towards all other members of the group. Slowly, in the course of the trial, her attitude changes and she becomes tolerant, docile and submissive. Her powerful humour slowly

transforms into rage before she finally sinks into helplessness and submission, "I'll smash up all this! I'll smash it all to bits – into little bits!" (93), and "You've all deliberately ganged up on me! You've plotted against me!" (Tendulkar:93).

By the end of the trial, she is a half-dead woman: "No, no! Don't leave me alone! I'm scared of them. . . . It's true I did commit a sin" (Tendulkar:117), and "Life is very dreadful thing. Life must be hanged" (Tendulkar:116). She is now not the jolly, confident and self-loving and self-assertive woman that she was at the beginning of the mock-trial. The mock-trial takes away all her pride and her self assertiveness slowly and gradually as all the others tries to prove her guilty. All the good qualities of her self extinguishes one by one and she becomes a totally different and detached person by the end of the mock-trial. Her proud previous personality vanishes and the transformation in her self makes her an altogether different person who is morally degraded and submissive self of a sinner.

The conflict between the claims for freedom as an autonomous person and the demands made by society reveal her fragmented and fractured identity. Leela Benare wants to be independent, assertive and alive to the senses, to be the person that she was before the trial, but society wants her to be submissive and a slave to its norms of morality. The demands of society make her what she is post-trial. Her 'self' undergoes a terrible change during the process of the trial. But she only reluctantly accepts the new 'self' that others have forced on her. The mock-trial is thus indicative of the killing of her real 'self' and its replacement by a socially appropriate 'self' imposed on her. Tendulkar makes her condition evident through direct intervention in the form of specific stage directions: "She looks half dead" (Tendulkar:109), and the following: "There she sits down, half fainting. Then in paroxysms of torment, she collapses with her head on the table, motionless" (Tendulkar:119).

The play can be seen as deconstructing the stereotype of the Indian woman as Devi or Shakti: it demonstrates that there is no ideal Indian woman as such, apart from the real flesh-and-blood women. The identity of a woman is socially and culturally constructed and her hybrid identity is the outcome of many socio-political and personal ends. Leela Benare is the example of a woman who, though against the socially acceptable codes of morality, appears to be an idealist; Mrs. Kashikar is the example of another kind of woman who is ostensibly respectable and morally superior yet proves to be spiteful, vengeful, unsuccessful, frustrated and jealous. Mrs. Kashikar would also like to be independent and strong-willed like Leela Benare, but since she lacks what it takes to be Leela Benare, she instead chooses to disgrace her publicly.

The playwright explores various facets of socio-cultural concepts and conditions of Indian society. Leela Benare is governed by the complex socio-cultural forces on one hand and on the other she possesses her own obscure psychological motivations. She needs to assert her place somewhere in between the two forces. But the impact of society and surrounding seems more powerful as it doesn't allow her to create a 'third place' for her.

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