
**THEMATIC JOURNEY OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN VIJAY
TENDULKAR'S SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION**

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Article Received: 18 June 2026, Article Revised: 08 July 2026, Published on: 28 July 2026

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.8373>

ABSTRACT

Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is in Session* occupies a significant position in the history of modern Indian drama because of its uncompromising representation of gender discrimination, social hypocrisy, patriarchal morality and the psychological violence inflicted upon women. At the centre of the play stands Leela Benare, an educated, independent and emotionally complex schoolteacher whose personal life becomes the subject of a mock trial that gradually transforms into a brutal social prosecution. The present study examines Benare's thematic journey through the framework of feminist literary criticism, with particular attention to the symbolic significance of the songs and poetic fragments associated with her character. The study argues that Benare's songs are not ornamental interruptions in the dramatic structure; rather, they constitute an alternative narrative language through which a woman attempts to express experiences that patriarchal discourse refuses to hear. Ramen Goswami's study of the songs of Leela Benare is particularly important in this context because "it demonstrates that the songs reveal the protagonist's psychological life, her memories, her maternal suffering and her struggle for self-expression. The present article extends that argument by placing Benare within the historical development of feminist thought—from the struggle for basic rights associated with the first wave to the later emphasis on patriarchy, sexuality, identity, reproductive autonomy and intersectionality. The paper further contends that Benare's journey moves from cheerful self-assertion to forced silence, but her silence itself becomes a form of testimony against the patriarchal court. The study concludes that Tendulkar's play anticipates several concerns of feminist theory and continues to remain relevant because the social mechanisms that judge, silence and discipline women remain deeply persistent"—DOI: 10.24113/ijellh.v9i7.11124.

KEYWORDS: Vijay Tendulkar, Leela Benare, feminism, patriarchy, feminist waves, songs, silence, motherhood, gender discrimination, Indian drama.

INTRODUCTION

Indian drama has frequently served as a powerful space for examining the contradictions between social morality and individual freedom. Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is in Session* is one of the most powerful examples of this tradition. Originally written in Marathi as *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe*, the play presents a group of amateur theatre performers who gather to rehearse a mock trial. What begins as a theatrical game gradually becomes a terrifying examination of the private life of Leela Benare. The apparently fictional courtroom soon exposes the real court of society. Benare is not formally charged with a legal crime. Her real "crime" is that she has attempted to live outside the approved structures of patriarchal morality. She is an unmarried woman, an independent teacher and a pregnant mother. Her personal history is therefore converted into public evidence against her. The play reveals how society constructs a woman's body, sexuality, motherhood and personal choices as matters subject to collective judgment. The importance of Benare's character lies in her complexity. She is neither merely a victim nor an uncomplicated rebel. At the beginning of the play, she is lively, energetic, humorous and self-confident. Her laughter and songs create a striking contrast with the oppressive atmosphere that later develops around her. Her transformation is therefore not simply psychological; it is thematic and structural. The cheerful woman who speaks, sings and moves freely is gradually forced into silence by the patriarchal community. Ramen Goswami's important journal, "Symbols of the Songs by Leela Benare in Vijay Tendulkar's Play *Silence! The Court is in Session*," argues that the songs possess a significant structural and psychological function in the play. According to the study, Tendulkar uses four songs and one poem to introduce a lyrical dimension into an otherwise realistic dramatic world. More significantly, these songs are placed in Benare's voice, allowing her to narrate her own emotional experience through a language different from the language of the courtroom.--- DOI: 10.24113/ijellh.v9i7.11124. This article develops that insight through a feminist reading of Benare's thematic journey. It asks three central questions: What does Benare's journey reveal about the relationship between womanhood and patriarchy? How do the songs function as symbols of her suppressed subjectivity? And how can the major waves of feminism help us understand the different dimensions of her struggle?

Thematic Journey: From Laughter to Silence

Benare's journey is one of the most important structural movements in Tendulkar's play. She enters the dramatic world with energy. Her speech is spontaneous, her behaviour is unconventional and her relationship with the world appears confident. She is not introduced as a silent or submissive woman. Instead, she occupies space. This is significant from a feminist perspective. Patriarchal societies often expect women to be modest, controlled and socially predictable. Benare violates these expectations through her vitality. Her laughter is excessive; her speech is direct; her behaviour is independent. She refuses to perform the passive femininity expected of her. Yet the play gradually demonstrates that female independence is tolerated only within certain limits. Benare may be cheerful and outspoken as long as her freedom remains socially harmless. Once her sexuality and pregnancy become visible, the same society that accepts her laughter begins to condemn her existence.

Her journey may therefore be divided into three broad stages:

The stage of freedom and self-expression

The stage of exposure and social judgment

The stage of silence and inner resistance

At the first stage, Benare possesses a voice. She speaks, jokes and sings. At the second stage, the men around her appropriate her story and convert it into evidence. At the third stage, her voice is violently suppressed. Yet the final silence does not necessarily signify complete defeat. It also reveals the moral bankruptcy of the people who have silenced her.

The courtroom therefore becomes a metaphor for patriarchal society. The law is merely a theatrical disguise. The real trial concerns a woman's right to desire, to love, to become a mother and to make decisions about her own life.

Feminism and the Historical Development of Women's Rights

The feminist reading of Benare becomes more meaningful when her character is placed within the broader historical development of feminist thought. The first wave of feminism, generally associated with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focused primarily on legal and political equality. The right to education, property, employment and voting became central concerns. Benare can be read in relation to this historical struggle because she embodies the educated and economically independent woman. She is a schoolteacher who earns her own livelihood. Her professional identity demonstrates the significance of women's access to education and employment. However, Tendulkar shows that economic independence does not automatically guarantee social freedom. Benare may earn her living,

but society still claims the authority to judge her private life. Her employment gives her a degree of independence, but it does not protect her from patriarchal control. Thus, Benare represents an important limitation of first-wave emancipation: a woman may acquire education and employment and yet remain subject to moral surveillance. The second wave of feminism, particularly from the 1960s onward, expanded the feminist discussion beyond formal legal equality. It examined the personal as political. Marriage, sexuality, reproduction, domestic labour, the family and the female body became political questions. Her central conflict is not merely about employment or legal rights. It concerns her personal life. Her relationship with men, her pregnancy and her motherhood become public matters. The play demonstrates that patriarchal society attempts to regulate the private lives of women.

Benare's pregnancy is therefore political. It becomes the central evidence used against her. Her body is treated as an object over which society claims jurisdiction. The question is not whether she has committed a crime but whether she has violated the social script written for women. From a second-wave feminist perspective, Benare's situation exposes the patriarchal belief that a woman's sexuality must be controlled by social institutions. Marriage becomes the approved condition for sexual expression and motherhood. A woman who becomes pregnant outside marriage is treated as morally deviant, while the male figure responsible for the pregnancy is not subjected to comparable punishment. This double standard is one of the most important feminist concerns in the play. The third wave of feminism questioned the idea that all women experience oppression in exactly the same way. It emphasised individual identity, sexuality, difference and the complexities of womanhood. Benare's character is particularly suitable for such a reading. She cannot be reduced to the category of "victim." She is educated, employed, sexually aware and emotionally independent. Her life does not fit a single social model. Her identity is also contradictory. She is simultaneously strong and vulnerable. She is socially independent but emotionally wounded. She is outspoken but eventually silenced. She is a woman who seeks love but also suffers because of the unequal power relations embedded within her relationships.

Contemporary feminism has placed increasing emphasis on sexual harassment, consent, bodily autonomy, digital violence, institutional abuse and the importance of giving survivors a voice. Although Tendulkar's play was written long before the contemporary digital age, Benare's experience remains relevant to these concerns. Her life is examined by a group of people who believe that they have the right to define her morality. Her personal history is publicly exposed. Her consent is irrelevant to the process. The group constructs a narrative

about her and forces her to inhabit it. In this sense, the mock trial anticipates contemporary discussions about public shaming and the social policing of women's bodies.

The Symbolism of Songs in Leela Benare's Journey

The songs associated with Benare are central to the understanding of her character. Goswami's study specifically identifies the importance of four songs and one poem in the play and argues that the songs reveal the protagonist's psychological condition and allow her to narrate her life in lyrical terms.

Song as an Alternative Voice

The courtroom is dominated by male speech. The men question, accuse, interpret and judge. Their language is institutional and authoritative. Benare, however, possesses another form of expression: song. The song becomes a space where she can momentarily escape the rigid logic of the courtroom. In ordinary speech, she is forced to answer questions created by others. In song, she speaks through memory, metaphor and emotion. This distinction is crucial. Patriarchal systems often permit women to speak only when their speech remains intelligible within established structures. Song disrupts that structure. It allows Benare to express emotional truths that cannot be easily converted into legal evidence.

The First Song: Memory, Love and Betrayal

Benare's first song is connected with her past and the emotional history that shaped her life. The song recalls her early experience of love and the painful consequences of social interference and male betrayal. Its symbolic significance lies in the conflict between youthful hope and social reality. Benare once imagined love as a possible route towards fulfilment. However, that possibility is destroyed by the pressures surrounding her.

The song therefore represents the lost possibility of a different life. It also reveals the gendered nature of responsibility. The male figure who participates in the relationship is not socially destroyed in the same way as Benare. The woman, however, carries the consequences in her body and reputation. The song becomes, therefore, a compressed history of patriarchal injustice. The nursery rhyme—"The grass is green / The rose is red / This book is mine / Till I am dead"—appears simple, but its simplicity is deceptive. The phrase "This book is mine" becomes particularly significant when read in relation to Benare's struggle for ownership of her own life. Goswami interprets the song in relation to possessiveness and freedom. ---DOI: 10.24113/ijellh.v9i7.11124.

The song can be read as a symbolic expression of self-possession. Benare wants her life to belong to herself. She wants the right to determine the meaning of her existence. However, the tragedy of the play is that society refuses to accept her ownership of herself. Her body, sexuality and motherhood are treated as public property. The song's apparently childish language therefore acquires an ironic feminist meaning.

A woman declares: "This is mine." Patriarchy responds: "No. Your life belongs to us."

Song and Maternal Consciousness Benare's songs also reveal the emotional reality of motherhood. Her pregnancy is not merely a biological fact in the play. It becomes the point at which her individual identity collides with social morality. The men view her pregnancy primarily as evidence of moral failure. Benare, however, experiences it as part of her emotional and maternal identity. This difference is crucial. Patriarchy often speaks about women's bodies from outside. Benare's songs allow the audience to experience the emotional dimension of the body from within. The song thus becomes a maternal voice—a voice that the courtroom cannot adequately understand.

Song and the Transformation of the Character

At the beginning of the play, Benare's songs are associated with vitality. They help establish her as cheerful and energetic. Later, however, the significance of song changes.

The earlier musical voice becomes increasingly distant as the mock trial intensifies. This structural transformation mirrors the destruction of her freedom. In this sense, the movement from song to silence is one of the most important dramatic journeys in the play.

The male characters claim the authority to decide what constitutes respectable womanhood. Their moral language is not neutral. It is gendered. A man's sexual history may be treated as a personal matter. A woman's sexual history becomes a social crime.

This unequal standard is central to the feminist significance of the play. Benare's pregnancy becomes evidence against her, but the man involved in her emotional history does not experience equivalent punishment. The body of the woman is therefore transformed into a site of social control. Benare's situation also reveals the relationship between patriarchy and motherhood. Society often glorifies motherhood in abstract terms while condemning mothers who do not conform to socially approved structures. The pregnant unmarried woman becomes an especially powerful figure of social anxiety because she challenges the belief that sexuality, marriage and motherhood must always exist within a single institutional framework.

The Courtroom as a Patriarchal Institution

The mock courtroom is one of the most powerful symbols in the play. It represents the social mechanisms through which women are judged. The courtroom is not genuinely interested in truth. It is interested in punishment. The participants already possess assumptions about Benare. The trial merely provides a formal structure through which those assumptions can be expressed. This is precisely how patriarchal ideology often functions. It does not always require physical force. It can operate through ridicule, gossip, moral judgment and institutional authority. The men in the play transform private information into public evidence. They make Benare's personal life available for collective examination. The theatrical nature of the trial makes the situation even more disturbing. The characters begin by pretending to be actors, but their performance reveals their real prejudices. Tendulkar therefore suggests that social oppression is itself a form of performance. People perform morality while concealing their own failures.

Benare and the Problem of Female Agency

A simplistic interpretation may portray Benare only as a helpless victim. Such an interpretation would reduce the complexity of Tendulkar's characterisation. Benare possesses agency. She works. She loves. She makes decisions. She expresses desire. She refuses to live entirely according to social expectations. However, agency does not mean absolute freedom. The tragedy of Benare lies in the fact that she possesses enough agency to challenge patriarchy but not enough institutional power to escape its consequences. Her freedom is therefore precarious. This is one of the most realistic aspects of Tendulkar's drama. Women may possess intelligence, employment and courage, yet still remain vulnerable to social structures larger than themselves. Benare's tragedy is not that she is weak. Her tragedy is that her strength is confronted by a society organised to punish women who use it.

CONCLUSION

Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is in Session* remains a powerful feminist text because it examines not only the oppression of women but also the social mechanisms through which oppression becomes normalised. Leela Benare is condemned not because she lacks intelligence or moral consciousness but because she refuses to fit comfortably within the patriarchal structure imposed upon her. Her thematic journey from laughter and song to silence represents the destruction of female self-expression by social judgment. Yet her songs remain central to the meaning of the play. As Ramen Goswami argues, the songs provide

Benare with a lyrical mode of narrating her own experience and reveal her psychological pain, memories and maternal consciousness. The songs are therefore not decorative elements. They are alternative forms of testimony. The first wave helps us understand her struggle for education and independence. The second wave illuminates the politics of her sexuality, motherhood and private life. The third wave helps us recognise her complexity as a woman who cannot be reduced to a single identity. Contemporary feminist thought further reveals the continuing relevance of public shaming, social surveillance and the silencing of women. Ultimately, *Silence! The Court Is in Session* asks a deeply uncomfortable question: what happens when society gives a woman the freedom to speak but refuses to listen to what she says? Benare's songs provide one answer. Her silence provides another.

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