

Subversion of Phonic Speech through Aphonia in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence!* *The Court is in Session*

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This paper focuses on the aphonic nuances of language in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* and how it works towards subverting the superfluity of phonic speech and phallogocentric practices. Aphonic speech refers to the mouthed or suggested nuances of speech lacking phonation as opposed to articulate speech sounds. Silence is a subversive leitmotif in the play, rejecting militaristic masculine discourses and escaping the determinacy of meaning. *Silence! The Court is in Session*, the first Tendulkar play to become part of the New Indian Drama phenomenon of the sixties, is based on the 1956 short-story, *Die Panne* (Traps) by Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt. The play presents a miniscule cross-section of Indian society that passes phallic decree in the name of verdict, using the extended metaphor of the court. The paper focuses on the aphonic nuances of language in the play as it works towards subverting phonic discourses, and presents it as dissociated speech as unmoored from the body.

The court in the play stands as a metaphor of the patriarchal society where hegemonic norms are reinforced through the tenor of command. The court also embodies the laws whereby woman is precipitated into the symbolic order of signification. The court has the final say in any civil construct imposing the final judgement, as does the prototypal male in Indian society. The reiterating statement of the

court, “Silence! The Court is in Session” in the imperative forms the title of the play, and works analogically to Mr.Kashikar doggedly silencing his wife or Damle silencing Benare in a patriarchal society. The monologic verdict is the final decree the woman has to abide by, rendering her a passive linguistic construct. The court as metaphor analogical to the patriarchal system is worked out perfectly by the playwright in the sense of legitimising these practices. Mrs Kashikar hits the nail on the head when she likens the trial of the court to the trial of a woman (p. 73). The law book held by Samant, a book that dictates the rules, attests to lack of linguistic agency for women and preaches discursive authority. It attests to the logocentric nature of our episteme at the elementary stage of meaning production or law-making. There is persistent reference to this book later as Rokde tries to instruct himself on the underlying rules of patriarchy. Sukhatme declares: “No allowance must be made because the accused is a woman” (p. 115). The acoustic effects in the play function at a metaphoric level. This is echoed with the reiterating command ‘Silence! The Court is in Session’ in a tenor suggestive of epistemic violence.

Western metaphysics has been built on dialectical pairs where the binaries of man/woman function analogical to speech/silence, active/passive, sanity/insanity, etc. This phenomenon is also reflected in linguistic structures and theories where women are viewed as the ‘aporias’ in a phallogocentric system, or as latent semiotic flux in dominant symbolic systems. It can be located in instances where sexism functions parallel to speciesism as women are equated with silence or the indeterminacy of meaning. This practice translates into domestic codes or extends to domestic spaces where women are restricted to silent spaces like the kitchen based on mechanical or housekeeping function, or the storeroom analogical to the womb, limited to storage functions. This kind of persistent epistemic exclusion limits them from contribution to knowledge production. Through these patriarchal structures, they are exacted into silence and subservience.

Sexism works in the play *Silence* parallel to speciesism in silencing the woman and limiting her to her bodily functions. In keeping with Cartesian dualism, the dialectical pair man/woman is reduced to

the binary head/body: transcendence/immanence where the head reigns supreme in accordance with Western and Eastern ideologies, a hierarchical pair that Girish Karnad attempts to subvert in his *Hayavadana*. Benare echoes the idea of women being equated with immanence when she claims that for men the woman was only about the body.

She worshipped that man's intellect. But all he understood was her body. (p. 108)

He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! That's all! Again, the body! (p. 118)

The affiliation with speciesism is also apparent in woman being restricted only to her somatic functions and viewed only as an extension of the body, defining her in terms of motherhood. This idea of sexism functioning analogical to speciesism is also evident from the leitmotif of the parrot in Samant's hands. The parrot functions as an apt acoustic signifier, as it can only repeat what is uttered to it by the others, without a voice of its own. The woman is domesticated in this set-up as symbolized by the parrot in Samant's hands, ironically, the innocent of the lot. The parrot and the puppetry motif simultaneously reifies and animalizes the woman. Even in writing his plays, Vijay Tendulkar was insistent that "he must never play the role of a puppeteer and reduce his characters to dumb and lifeless puppets" (Tendulkar, 2003b, p. xxiv).

Benare, forced into reticence, is subjected to the 'species gaze' in the trial by the gossip-like stance of patriarchy. Gossip as a register that has been always equated with women in a patriarchal society, is here attributed to men. The Judge, the conveyor of justice, appears to be judgmental as he enters the witness box and far from sounding objective, assumes a gossip-like manner. Rather than getting to see a courtroom drama, the voyeuristic tendencies of the social order are exhibited in brazen candour. The hypocrisy of this court analogical to the social order is foregrounded here. Ironically, the mock-trial is for the Progressive Association's Mock Law that highlights its objective: "Spreading enlightenment is also one of the Prime Objectives behind our programme" (p. 59).

The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* consistently makes use of symbolism to echo how women are exacted into silence. Benare is imprisoned in this age-old patrilineal system represented by the lock-and-key held by Samant. As silence has been deployed as a weapon against women. Towards the end of the play Samant tells Benare, “If you don’t pull the bolt properly to one side when you come, and then you close the door from inside, you’ve had it” (p. 95), conjuring up again the motif of the lock and the key. There are indications in the play suggesting that women should not opt for silence as a mode of subservience, but one of strategic response and as subversive strategy: “Madam, when you pulled the bolt you did it in the wrong way. You should have pulled it back fully” (p. 95). As Luce Irigaray claims, instead of marking women’s erasure in the dominant discourse of speech, silence can turn regenerative from where differences can unfold or other worlds can come into being (Irigaray, 2002, p. 63). The only aspect attributed to woman – her silence in terms of ruptures, slippage of meaning and displacements – is used subversively by Benare and functions as an important leitmotif in the play

Also, silence undermines dissociated speech, speech dissociated from the body (Sontag, 2021). Men, while they affiliate themselves with speech and phonocentrism, simultaneously dissociate themselves from the body. Unmoored from the body, speech loses its organic coherence. Women have been excluded from the major formal genre of oratory that is required for participation in political events (Gal, 2009, p. 5), and have been forcefully obstructed from the public realm of speech (Rich, 1979, as cited in Ferguson, 2002, p. 4). In the play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, we find men engaging in oratory to establish their stance. There is also the disparity between philosophy and practice in the play during the course of these rhetorical articulations. The woman in Indian philosophy, has always been placed on a pedestal, deified as the Rani/Devi/Lakshmi, but in practice subjugated into silence or circumscribed speech. When it comes to delivering justice to the accused, Sukhatme declares: “*Na stri swatantryamarhati*. Woman is not for independence” (p. 115), even while patriarchy ironically identifies the nation with the motif of an independent motherland. The course of arguments does not exclude

rationalizations: “Motherhood is pure.” Sukhatme utters mechanically: “Motherhood is a sacred thing:”

Mother and
The Motherland,
Both are even
Higher than heaven. (p. 79)

In spite of all their veneration of motherhood, towards the end, Benare is commanded to kill the baby in her womb. The court that charges Benare with the crime ‘Infanticide’ at the beginning of the play, towards the end pronounces the decree that the baby be killed in the womb: Ironically, the initial charge transforms into the final verdict, underscoring the dissociation of sensibility of the dominant phallogocentric discourse. The court, the conveyor of justice, insults the Mother in spite of preaching ‘perpetual worship’ of her, by denying her, her very basic identity – the state of being a mother. While they hail the paradigm of motherhood with their register of oratory: “She weaves a magic circle with her whole existence in order to protect and preserve her little one” (p. 79), they contradict themselves in spite of all their rhetorical histrionics. Their swearing on the Oxford English Dictionary rather serves to highlight the superfluity of speech, and how all notions of gender and sexuality are discursive in nature.

Here, logorrhea functions like Pinteresque silences, in that a volley of words is sometimes employed to conceal certain silences. Benare’s intermittent bouts of loquaciousness function as a curtain to shield the depression that represses her. In dominant phallic discourses, either a woman is debilitated with inarticulateness, or as some medieval sources foreground, women characterized by loquaciousness were stereotyped as being too sexual, silly, or unchaste. It was assumed that women who were loose with their words would also be loose with their morality. “As liminal zones providing entrances and exits to the body, and as body parts with similar shapes, the physical and semiotic association of mouth and vulva was a given and of course the linguistic correlation of both sets of lips was readily apparent in the Latin word *labia*” (Easton, 2009, p. 13). Similarly, in the play, either Benare is forced into circumscribed speech, or her prolixity is equated with sexual wantonness.

Benare's silence subverts the militaristic standardized rigid symbolic discourses of patriarchy. The court is regressive in its approach as the accused is placed in a claustrophobic atmosphere where she is shunned by the voice of Law (Sukhatme), the voice of Science (Ponkshe), the voice of Art (Samant, Karnik), the voice of Society (Kashikar) and the voice of Tradition that finds a negative reciprocal in Mrs. Kashikar. In keeping with Muted Group Theory, Benare adopts silence as a mode of backchannel communication. Her only possession is her silence, and various attempts are made to break her Silence in Act Three. Samik Bandyopadhyay states: "The actors playing a mock courtroom drama play with silence, straining to tear through into the silence that Benare clings on to, forcing her to go deeper and deeper into the silence..." (Bandyopadhyay, 2003, p. xlvii). As Benare rushes towards the door from the oppressive environment, the way is barred and her only weapon appears to be silence. Heidegger had said: "This primordial silence is more powerful than any human potentiality. No one, on his or her own, has invented language—that is, has been strong enough to break the power of this language" (Heidegger, 1980, p. 218).

Silence appears to be a major motif in the play, as the word *silence* is uttered 34 times in the play. Tendulkar endeavours to subvert the speech/silence dichotomy where women have been equated with aporias in a phallogocentric system. In Kafka's parable on Ulysses it is said that the silence of the sirens in its absence was the extreme form of presence and represents a zero and ultimate degree of reality (Agamben & de la Durantaye, 2012, p. 95). Benare utilizes silence as a weapon of womanhood replete with matronymic semiotic ties, beyond male sentience and language. It is a construct they cannot deconstruct as it centers on indeterminacy. Catholic theologian Picard states that the primary value of silence is, paradoxically, this lack of value:

'Silence,' he argued, 'does not fit into the world of profit and utility...it cannot be exploited.' As absence, it lacks substance; as non-response, it resists interpellation. If silence can function to provoke a discursive subjectivity, then, its power is neither defensive nor aggressive. It may operate on both registers at once, as in Lyotard's (1988, p. 3–31) description of the 'differend' as speech

which is simultaneously demanded and impossible. (Ferguson, 2002, p. 9)

Though silence is considered as an appropriate response, it has often been represented as absence (Ferguson, 2002, p. 2). This is what infuriates the others around Benare. For a person to become silent is to become opaque for the other, as it stands for impenetrability (Sontag, 2021). Rather than a mode of passivization, Benare utilizes it as a tool of dissent:

Sukhatme. The accused, by her silence, has as good answered me.(p. 98)

Kashikar. This is intolerable rudeness. (p. 98)

Ponkshe. Exactly this is contempt of court!(p. 98)

Mrs.Kashikar. It seems she's decided not to behave herself and answer properly! (p. 99)

The silence motif is also expressed in the theatrical motifs. That Benare's thoughts and the mind-set of the society cannot co-exist is obvious as expressed in the theatrical motifs. For, when she talks, only she is kinetic, the others around become static. Here also, "the spoken is really a projection of the unspoken" (Bandyopadhyay, 2003, p. xlv). When the others talk, she freezes into silence. Also, the playwright, the astute craftsman that he was, drew on a number of barely heard asides, so that Benare could play her game forward (p. xlvi). Tendulkar underscores 'silence' as the second essential element in a play, as he elaborates on structural aspects of a play and the utilization of silence in a dialogue. 'Pauses' or caesura as this device is designated in theatre slang, had the power of the emoted word, according to Tendulkar, if the playwright knew how to use it (Tendulkar, 2003a, p. xxx).

The power of language to blur the lines between the real and virtual and intersperse time and space cannot be understated here. The time is out of joint in this set up as showcased by the clock that is out of order. The mock-trial gives us a sense of things occurring in the present; and yet they do not occur as the characters return to their normal situations towards the end. Vijay Tendulkar asserts: "The coexistence of the observer and the happening makes the reality. Reality becomes reality only when it is seen"("Conversation with

Tendulkar”, 2022). The Chinese box structure of the play with the motif of the play-within-a-play blurs the lines between the real and the virtual. The persecution of Benare exists, yet the others force her to believe that it is a game, a mock-trial. The naturalization of patriarchy is complete. Women interpellated with ideology in the patriarchal power structures now fail to perceive the borderline between illusion and reality. The same applies to the mock-trial that though real, puts on the garb of virtual reality. Karnik sums it all up when he states: “In Drama Theory we call this a Visual Enactment” (p. 71). Tendulkar had testified to the power of the illusion of reality on the stage in which words also had a major role to play (Tendulkar, 2003a, p. xxx). And even while language has the ability to go beyond time and space with this enactment, we see here that silence has the potential to step back into spatial or temporal retreat.

Tendulkar wanted the play to end in Benare’s intriguing silence. Though there is a monologue by Benare at the end of the play, the playwright admits that he was later threatened to add it. It says in the introduction to the *Collected Plays in Translation* that “the Benare speech was added to the play as an afterthought when the entire play was ready to be staged in the competition [the annual Maharashtra State Competition], and it was discovered that it fell short by ten minutes of the stipulated time limit and thus was likely to be rejected by the examining panel” (Tendulkar, 2003b, p. xlv). Tendulkar speaking to Arun Sadhu says:

I was of the opinion that Benare would not open before the others in the play. That was not in her character. I refused. Arvind and his people then almost locked me in a room and threatened to keep me there till I wrote a monologue at a point which Arvind had suggested.

I was compelled to write. So I made Benare fly into fantasy and made her recite a prolonged monologue... (Tendulkar, 2003b, p. xlv)

Therefore, the Benare that Tendulkar had conceived chose to maintain a venerable, yet imposing silence. The monologue was never intended to be there. Though silence is imposed by the male on the female, the intriguing silence backfires here. As speech has been

identified as the norm, and silence as something deviant, the very presence of silence becomes a kind of non-participation in the practices of community building, identity formation and norm setting (Ferguson, 2002, p. 6). Silence, here, stands for the irreducible Other, destabilizes the determinacy of meaning, deconstructs the metaphysics of presence, rejects the superfluity of speech, and escapes all phallogocentric and logocentric discursive practices. Though we get to hear the sound of the men, they come across as echoes without pronounced seity. In contrast, Benare's silence possesses an individuality of its own, even in terms of being an aphonic language. As Sontag had long ago spoken of silence as possessing a "wisdom of its own, keeping things open" (2021).

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Trauma That Outlives Time: A Transhistorical Analysis of Refugee Life in Elie Wiesel's *Night*.

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The present paper "Trauma That Outlives Time: A Transhistorical Analysis of Refugee Life in Elie Wiesel's Night" attempts to make an enquiry into the trauma and sufferings of refugee life. The memoir gives a detailed analysis of the real life experiences of the refugees of the Holocaust. Transhistorical Trauma is a major aspect of refugee literature especially in the Jewish Holocaust literature as the Jews were the victims of religious and racial discrimination. Transhistorism is a postmodern concept of analysing the historical documents based on varying interdisciplinary approaches. In Night, Elie Wiesel opens the eyes of the readers to the realities of the Jewish life by picturing the brutal genocide in the Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. War and struggles make the pages of history ruthless and bloody. The paper focuses on how Transhistoricism is applicable to analyse refugee trauma that transcends the barriers of history.

Key words: Transhistorism, Refugee, Holocaust, Trauma, Anti-Semitism.

The term 'history' refers to the record of the actions or events of the past. According to the famous historian, John Jacob Anderson,

History is a narration of events which have happened among mankind, including an account of the rise and fall of nations, as