

‘Stage’ing Protests

A summary of protest drama in world literature with focus
on *Silence! The Court is in Session*



Objectives

- To observe the evolution of protest drama in world literature and assess its position in the contemporary age
- To justify *Silence! The Court is in Session* as a significant text in the canon of world literature



Protest Drama

- Synonymous with ‘political theater’, but possesses greater scope
- Popularized post the Russian Revolution (1917)
- “The essence of protest theatre is that it is directed towards the power of an authority—political, religious, or so...” (Sundar 1989)



Protest Drama Through the Ages

- In the post-revolutionary period in Russia, theatre was used to educate the workers in Marxist doctrines; performed in factories and streets
- This movement spread from Russia to Europe and USA in the 1920s
- Examples: DENMARK: Henrik Ibsen's *Doll's House* (1879),
GERMANY: Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1941),
and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948)
AMERICA: Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947)
and *The Crucible* (1953)



Hamilton the Musical by Lin Manuel Miranda



Vijay Tendulkar (1928 – 2008)



- Author of *Shantata! Court Chaule Ahe* (1967), *Ghāshirām Kotwāl* (1972), and *Sakhārām Binder* (1972)
- All of Tendulkar's plays underscore the complexity of human relationship; in spite of these similarities, his plays are distinct from each other.



Vijay Tendulkar (1928 – 2008)



- Widely regarded as the first genuine playwright of modernity in India
- Acknowledged as the creator of the modern Indian 'theater of cruelty'



FACT BOX

THEATER OF CRUELTY:

The Theatre of Cruelty, developed by Antonin Artaud, aimed to shock audiences through gesture, image, sound and lighting. The Theatre of Cruelty is both a philosophy and a discipline. Artaud wanted to disrupt the relationship between audience and performer. The 'cruelty' in Artaud's thesis was sensory and exists in the work's capacity to shock and confront the audience, to go beyond words and connect with the emotions. The audience, he argued, should be placed at the centre of a piece of performance. Theatre should be an act of 'organised anarchy'.



"...most people either intensely disliked him or loved him. Nobody was indifferent to him. He seemed to play with his audience, at times amusing it, at times even irritating it. More often than not he seemed to throw the usual package of urban, upper middle class values into the dustbin. He had little use for those morals and mores, which were a curious mixture of brahmanical and Victorian mores"

~GP Deshpande, 'Remembering Tendulkar'

Silence! The Court is in Session (1978)

- *Shantata, Court Chalu Ahe* (in Marathi) – a landmark play in the annals of Indian drama in English
- Based on a 1956 short story, *Die Panne* (Traps) by Friedrich Durrensmatt, a Swedish playwright
- Written in the form of ‘meta-theater’ or a play within a play
- Translated into English by Priya Adarkar



Leela Benare

- A school teacher of eight years
- An unconventional and vivacious woman
- Is engaged in an affair with Professor Damle
- Is suspected of having committed infanticide
- Is made to participate in a 'trial' where she is accused of the same crime
- Transitions from her jovial, spirited self at the start of the play to a state of extreme agitation at the violation of her personal and psychological boundaries

Others

- Raghu Samant
- Sukhatme
- Balu Rokde
- Ponkshe
- Mrs Kashikar
- Mr Kashikar
- Karnik
- Professor Damle

Leela Benare:

“Life is very dreadful thing. Life must be hanged.

'Na Jevana Jevanamarhati ' . Life is not worthy of life.

Hold an inquiry against life – sack it from its job ”

Leela Benare:

“They’re holding an enquiry if you please! But my teaching’s perfect. I’ve put myself whole life into it – I’ve worn myself to a shadow in this job! Just because of one bit of slander what can they do to me? [...] My life is my own.”

Mrs Kashikar:

“[.....] that’s happens these days when you get everything without marrying. [...] It’s the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That’s how promiscuity has spread throughout our society.”

‘Silence!’ as a Crucial Text in World Literature

- Lays out the trials of negotiating love within a patriarchal society
- Commentary on the stigma associated with unplanned motherhood and premarital intercourse; presents a strong case in favour of women’s choice
- The institution of marriage is probed and critiqued
Also explored in
Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (explored via critique)
Congreve’s *Way of the World*, Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (explored through satire)



In Conclusion

- Pays homage to street theater – *Silence!* effectively invokes elements of street theatre such as song and folklore



*The parrot to the sparrow said,
‘Why, oh why, are your eyes so red?’
‘Oh, my dear friend, what shall I say?
Someone has stolen my nest away.’
Sparrow, sparrow, poor little sparrow...
‘Oh, brother crow, oh, brother crow,
Were you there? Did you see it go?’
‘No, I don’t know. I didn’t see.
What are your troubles to do with me?’
O sparrow, sparrow, poor little sparrow...*

(Tendulkar 1995)

In Conclusion

- Pays homage to street theater – *Silence!* invokes elements of street theatre such as song and folklore to devastating effect
- Employs the ‘no exit’ situation that had been made a principle by modernism



FACT BOX

NO EXIT:

Jean-Paul Sartre presents hell in his existential play *No Exit*. There are no pitchforks or demons in the play, only an ugly furnished hotel room with three characters. There is no sleeping in hell, and no blinking. Hell, as Garcin (a character from the play) says, is “life without a break”.

One of the biggest ironies in the play is that the “no exit” implied by the title is not an outside force, but is a cause of their own minds that entrap them in hell together.



In Conclusion

- A precursor to Indian feminist writing; portrays female struggle in a manner that evokes empathy from people of different backgrounds
- *“Theatre can be a mobile unit in a journey across new geographies, a place that doesn't center the discourse in white male hegemony, but a space that can be filled and moved, by and to the margins, perpetually decentered as it explores various identity configurations of production and reception”*
(Dolan 1993)
- A postcolonial text that draws attention to the role of intersecting histories and nationalist formations in affecting women's position in society



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