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Gender, Power, and Patriarchy in Modern Indian Drama: The Representation of Women in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is in Session* and *Ghashiram Kotwal*

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the representation of women and patriarchal power in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is in Session* and *Ghashiram Kotwal*. Through Leela Benare and Gauri, it examines two related but different forms of gendered control. Benare's private life is turned into a public trial by people who claim to defend morality, while Gauri becomes vulnerable within an exchange shaped by her father's political ambition and Nana Phadnavis's authority. The paper uses feminist literary criticism, particularly the analysis of sexual politics and institutional forms of patriarchy, alongside comparative close reading. It considers dialogue, dramatic structure, the distribution of speech, the role of the chorus, and the relationship between private conduct and public authority. The discussion argues that the plays expose patriarchy not only as individual male dominance but also as a system supported by social judgement, family interests, caste hierarchy, and political patronage. Existing scholarship has discussed gender and morality in *Silence!* and caste, marginality, and power in *Ghashiram Kotwal*. This paper builds on that work by comparing how public moral policing and political exchange place women's dignity and agency at risk. The comparison does not treat Benare and Gauri as identical figures; instead, it examines how their different dramatic positions shape their opportunities to speak and resist.

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INTRODUCTION

Drama makes social relationships visible by placing characters in situations where their words, choices, and conflicts can be observed. Modern Indian drama has often questioned established values and explored the tension between personal freedom and social expectations. The position of women is central to this discussion because women's behaviour is frequently measured against ideas of respectability, sexual morality, family honour, and obedience. These expectations raise a wider question: who has the authority to define what is moral, and whose interests are protected when social rules are enforced?

Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is in Session* and *Ghashiram Kotwal* approach these questions through different dramatic forms. In *Silence!* an amateur theatrical exercise develops into a mock trial in which Leela Benare's private life becomes a subject of public judgement. The group's apparent concern with morality conceals its willingness to humiliate a woman whose sexual and personal choice challenge accepted norms. In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the historical and musical form places gender within a larger network of caste, political patronage, and public authority. Gauri's vulnerability is linked to her father Ghashiram's pursuit of power and Nana Phadnavis's privileged position. The play's criticism is therefore not limited to an individual act of sexual exploitation; it also concerns the political arrangement that makes such exploitation possible.

The two plays should not be treated as identical accounts of women's oppression. Benare is central to the action and speaks at length, but she does not control the mock trial or its judgement. Gauri has a much more restricted presence in the dramatic action, and the consequences for her life are largely revealed through decisions made by men. This difference is important. The power to speak does not necessarily provide the power to decide, and the absence of a sustained female voice should not be mistaken for consent. By placing these characters side by side, this paper examines how patriarchal power works through collective moral judgement in one play and through family ambition and political exchange in the other.

The central argument is that Tendulkar presents patriarchy as a structure that is reproduced through everyday social behaviour as well as through powerful institutions. In *Silence!* a group converts prejudice into the language of a trial. In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the public authority of Nana and the ambitions of Ghashiram allow a young woman to be treated as part of a political bargain. Both plays expose the gap between claims of morality and the treatment of women, but they also show that gender oppression intersects with other forms of power, including class, caste, and political status.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

Critical writing on *Silence! The Court Is in Session* has frequently focused on Benare's public humiliation, the double standard applied to women's sexuality, and the relationship between speech and social control. Suresh Kumar argues that the play questions whether morality and social respectability are applied equally to women and men. His reading is relevant to the mock trial, where Benare is made to explain her private life while Professor Damle is not subjected to an equivalent public examination (Kumar). The imbalance is not incidental: it reveals how the social consequences of a sexual relationship are placed disproportionately on the woman.

V. Immanuel Sam reads the play through E. V. Periyar's critique of women's subordination and considers the restrictions placed on Benare and Mrs. Kashikar. This approach connects the characters' experiences with larger debates about chastity, education, and women's rights (Sam). Hitesh Yadav and Mercy George also offer a feminist reading of the mock trial, treating it as a dramatic image of the wider social mechanisms that regulate women's bodies and silence their voices (Yadav and George). These studies establish that Benare's treatment has already received feminist attention. The present paper therefore does not claim to offer the first feminist reading of *Silence!* it asks what becomes visible when the play is compared with a work in which gendered power operates through political patronage rather than a mock legal proceeding.

Research on *Ghashiram Kotwal* offers a different but related point of departure. Poonamlata Yadav discusses the intersections of gender, caste, and marginality in the play, with attention to Gauri, Ghashiram, and Nana Phadnavis (Yadav). This is important because the play cannot be reduced to a private story about a father and daughter. Ghashiram's position as an outsider in Poona and his treatment by the privileged Brahman establishment form part of the political context in which he seeks power. His later conduct also shows that a person who has experienced exclusion can reproduce domination when given authority. At the same time, Gauri's position exposes the gendered cost of this struggle for status. The political rise of her father is pursued at the expense of her agency and safety.

Broader studies of theatre history also help situate these plays. Lata Singh's work on actresses and the making of "modern" theatre examines how gender and ideals of respectability shaped women's public presence on stage (Singh). Although her subject is not Tendulkar's two plays specifically, her study supports a wider understanding of how gendered expectations influence theatrical culture and representation. For the present argument, however, the primary plays remain the central evidence; secondary criticism is used to establish the existing conversation and clarify the contribution of the comparison.

The research gap is therefore deliberately narrow. Feminist readings of *Silence! The Court Is in Session* already exist, and scholarship has considered gender, caste, and marginality in *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The contribution of this paper lies in comparing two distinct mechanisms of patriarchal power: the conversion of social prejudice into public moral judgement in *Silence!* and the use of family relationships and political patronage in *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The comparison also asks how dramatic form affects the visibility of women's experience. Benare's voice is heard but controlled by the group; Gauri's limited dramatic voice makes the decisions made around her especially significant. This is a focused comparative claim, not an assertion that no previous study has ever discussed both plays.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The paper uses feminist literary criticism as its main framework. Feminist criticism asks how literary texts represent women, how gender roles are created and maintained, and whose interests are protected by social rules. Kate Millett's concept of sexual politics is useful because it treats relations between men and women as relations of power rather than as purely private matters (Millett). From this perspective, a woman's sexuality, reputation, and access to choose become political when others claim the authority to regulate them. Benare's treatment and Gauri's exploitation can therefore be read as more than individual misfortunes: both reveal social arrangements in which men hold greater authority over women's lives.

Sylvia Walby's account of patriarchy further helps distinguish between different settings in which gender inequality is maintained (Walby). Patriarchal power does not operate in one way only. It may be sustained through household relationships, cultural expectations, institutions, and control over women's sexuality. In *Silence!* the group's mock trial acts as a small social institution: its members decide which facts matter, who may speak, and what judgement is acceptable. In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the family and the political establishment overlap. Ghashiram's ambition and Nana's authority turn Gauri's vulnerability into part of a political arrangement. These examples do not mean that the two plays portray the same institution; rather, they show how different arrangements can produce unequal gender relations.

The concept of voice is also important, but it must be used carefully. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question about the conditions under which marginalised people can be heard offers a useful prompt for reading the difference between Benare and Gauri (Spivak). This paper does not equate Gauri's position directly with every aspect of Spivak's argument. Instead, it asks how the dramatic text makes a woman's experience visible when she has limited control over the action and when men speak or act on her behalf. Benare's speech is more prominent, yet the other characters control the

setting in which her words are judged. Gauri's more limited voice shows how easily a woman can become the object of decisions without becoming their author.

Methodologically, the study uses qualitative close reading and comparative analysis. It examines character relationships, dialogue, dramatic situations, and the distribution of speech and authority. In *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, the analysis focuses on the shift from a staged game to a public examination of Benare, the group's language of morality, and the contrast between Benare and Damle. In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, it considers Ghashiram's outsider status, Nana's authority, the transaction involving Gauri, and the play's use of the Sutradhar and chorus to expose the gap between public respectability and private conduct. The readings are interpretive and do not claim to measure social conditions outside the plays.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Collective Judgement and the Regulation of Women in Silence! The Court Is in Session, the mock trial in *Silence! The Court Is in Session* is the central dramatic device through which Tendulkar exposes the authority a group claims over a woman's private life. At first, the characters appear to be taking part in a harmless theatrical exercise. The situation changes when the trial becomes a way to expose Benare's pregnancy and her relationship with Professor Damle. This shift matters because the group does not simply discover information about Benare; it turns that information into a public spectacle. A game becomes a mechanism of punishment, and the language of the court gives social prejudice the appearance of fairness.

The mock trial also reveals how a community can make its values seem natural by repeating them collectively. The characters take on roles that allow them to question Benare, arrange accusations, and define the meaning of her behaviour. Their authority is not based on a careful investigation of harm. Instead, the trial draws its force from assumptions about women's sexuality and respectability. Benare's pregnancy outside marriage is treated as evidence of a moral failure, while the man involved is not brought into the same public process. The absence of Damle becomes significant: his professional status and absence from the room do not protect Benare, but they prevent an equivalent examination of his responsibility. The play thus exposes the gendered distribution of shame.

The group's behaviour is especially revealing because some of its members appear respectable and educated. Tendulkar suggests that education or a public image of progressiveness does not automatically free people from patriarchal thinking. The characters' roles in the trial allow them to present their actions as a defence of social values, even while their treatment of Benare becomes cruel. The violence is therefore partly verbal and institutional. They do not need to use physical

force at every moment because the authority of the group, the ritual of questioning, and the threat of social disgrace already limit her freedom.

Benare is not simply silent or passive. Her liveliness and her willingness to speak make the group's response more troubling. She attempts to preserve her dignity, but the trial does not offer her equal power over the proceedings. The distinction between speaking and being heard is central here. Benare may answer accusations, yet the other characters decide which parts of her life become evidence and how her words will be interpreted. In this sense, the title's demand for silence works on two levels: it is a practical instruction within a courtroom-like setting, and it also points to the social demand that women should accept the judgement passed on them. Her speech does not disappear, but it is surrounded by a structure designed to weaken its authority. Benare's emotional account of her relationship with Damle makes the imbalance painfully clear when she says, "I offered up my body on the altar of my worship and my intellectual god took the offering and went his way" (Tendulkar, *Silence!* 118). The religious metaphor presents the relationship as an act of devotion and sacrifice, but the image of the man simply going his way exposes the unequal consequences of that intimacy. Benare's language conveys not only personal hurt but also the cost of investing trust in a man who does not share the public burden of the relationship. The line therefore deepens the play's criticism of a social order that treats a woman's sexuality as evidence against her while allowing the man to remain outside the spectacle of judgement.

The play's critique is not limited to the actions of one man. It is produced through the participation of the group, including characters who may themselves be constrained by social expectations. Mrs. Kashikar's presence is especially important because women can also help enforce the standards that restrict other women. This does not mean that male and female characters hold equal power in the situation. Rather, it shows how patriarchal values can be repeated by people who have learned to regard them as normal. The social order survives not only through direct male command but also through the internalisation and repetition of its moral rules.

Kumar's discussion of the double standards surrounding Benare supports this reading, while Sam's use of Periyar's ideas places the play within a broader criticism of women's subordination (Kumar; Sam). The present comparison adds that the mock trial should be understood as a form of collective power. Benare's body and private life become public property in the eyes of the group. The injustice lies not simply in what they say about her but in their assumption that they are entitled to decide what her life means. The play challenges the moral authority of a society that condemns a woman more openly than it questions the man who shares responsibility for the situation.

Gauri, Family Ambition, and Political Power in Ghashiram Kotwal

Ghashiram Kotwal expands the discussion from public moral judgement to the relationship between gender, caste, and political authority. Set in the world of Peshwa-era Poona, the play uses a musical historical form, folk performance elements, and the commentary of the Sutradhar and chorus. These choices prevent the action from appearing as a simple naturalistic account of one family. The chorus can expose the gap between the public language of virtue and the behaviour of powerful men, while the theatrical form makes social hierarchy appear as something repeatedly performed and reinforced.

Ghashiram begins as an outsider who experiences humiliation in Poona. His identity as a newcomer leaves him exposed to a social order in which Brahman status carries authority. The early scenes show that the city's hierarchy is not merely a background detail: it shapes who can move freely, who can demand respect, and who is treated as inferior. Ghashiram's resentment develops in response to this exclusion. Yet the play does not present his later rise as a simple triumph over injustice. When he seeks Nana Phadnavis's favour, his desire for recognition becomes inseparable from the pursuit of power. He does not dismantle the system that humiliated him; he attempts to gain a place within it.

Gauri's position exposes the gendered cost of that ambition. Ghashiram's relationship with Nana is built around an unequal exchange in which his daughter becomes a means of gaining political favour. The father's role, which should imply care and protection, is turned into a source of danger. Gauri is not simply caught between two men; she is placed within a structure that treats male ambition and political advancement as more important than her wishes and dignity. Nana's authority gives him the ability to disguise exploitation as privilege or personal favour, while Ghashiram's desire for status leads him to cooperate with a transaction that harms his own daughter.

Nana's language is part of this manipulation. When he addresses the young girl with the promise, "Child, what do you want? All your dreams this Nana will fulfil" (Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal* 48), the apparent generosity conceals a relationship marked by unequal power. The use of "Child" presents Nana as benevolent and paternal, while the promise that he can fulfil her dreams places him in the position of a powerful benefactor. The line is unsettling because its tone of care does not remove the coercive context. Instead, the gap between the affectionate language and the unequal relationship helps reveal how authority can make exploitation appear acceptable.

The Sutradhar and chorus further undermine Nana's public respectability. The lines "For Nana no labour, just lust. / Lust knows no age, no shame" expose the sexual desire behind his public position (Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal* 52). The compact rhythm makes the criticism direct, and the reference to age and shame removes any possibility of presenting the encounter as a

relationship between equals. Unlike the mock trial in *Silence!*, where a group uses moral language to condemn a woman, *Ghashiram Kotwal* uses the chorus to reveal the moral corruption of a powerful man. Yet this exposure does not automatically protect Gauri. The play makes visible a system in which truth can be spoken theatrically while power continues to operate in practice.

The line "The heart that gives a daughter to your whims and fancies, Highness" is particularly revealing when Ghashiram confronts Nana (Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal* 52-54). Ghashiram recognises that his daughter has been sacrificed to Nana's desires, but his own role in the arrangement complicates his position. He is both an outsider who has suffered humiliation and a father who has allowed his daughter to become a means of advancement. The play therefore refuses an easy division between victim and oppressor. Ghashiram's suffering helps explain his anger, but it does not excuse his willingness to use Gauri. His conduct shows how the desire to escape oppression can turn into a desire to command others.

This movement from victimisation to domination is central to the political structure of the play. Once Ghashiram gains office as Kotwal, he uses authority to control the people of Poona. The Sutradhar describes the measures through a rapid series of actions: "Whipped people. Arrested people. Demanded people's permits. Imprisoned people. Sued people" (Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal* 56). The accumulation of verbs creates a sense of continuous intervention in ordinary life. Punishment becomes routine, and authority is experienced through restriction, surveillance, and fear. The sequence also connects Ghashiram's personal transformation to the broader political system: he adopts coercive methods rather than challenging the principle that power gives one person control over others.

The play's gender politics should therefore be read alongside its treatment of caste and political patronage. Ghashiram is marginalised by a hierarchy that favours the established Brahman community, but he later gains authority by becoming useful to Nana. Nana, in turn, can benefit from Ghashiram's policing while maintaining his own public standing. Gauri's exploitation is part of this arrangement, but it is not the only example of its violence. The same political logic eventually produces the harsh treatment of the people of Poona. Yadav's discussion of gender, caste, and marginality is helpful here because it places Gauri's experience within the play's wider structure of social inequality (Yadav).

The chorus's criticism of Nana and Ghashiram does not make the play's social world automatically just. The ability to expose wrongdoing is not the same as the ability to stop it. This is a significant difference from a simple morality tale in which a corrupt man is identified and punished. The play shows how political authority is negotiated, transferred, and withdrawn according to the interests of the powerful. When Ghashiram's rule becomes inconvenient, Nana can present him as the

problem and distance himself from the system he helped create. Such scapegoating protects the political order by shifting blame from its influential beneficiaries to the official who carried out its violence.

Gauri's limited presence is central to the force of this critique. The dramatic action gives more space to the ambitions and negotiations of Ghashiram and Nana than to Gauri's own perspective. Her restricted voice should not be interpreted as a lack of importance; it reveals how little room the political arrangement leaves for her to shape her future. The audience learns about the consequences of male decisions while being denied sustained access to Gauri's own account of them. The form itself thus becomes part of the representation of power: men negotiate, promise, bargain, and command, while the woman whose life is affected remains marginal to the process.

Comparing Benare and Gauri: Voice, Agency, and the Limits of Resistance

The comparison between Benare and Gauri reveals both a shared structure and a significant difference. Both women live in circumstances where men and social institutions claim authority over their lives. Benare is judged because her private conduct violates accepted ideas of sexual morality. Gauri is placed at risk because her father seeks political advancement and Nana has the power to exploit the arrangement. In the first play, patriarchal power works through public accusation and collective scrutiny; in the second, it works through family ambition, sexual exploitation, caste hierarchy, and political patronage.

Their dramatic positions also differ. Benare's speech is prominent, but the group controls the setting in which her speech is received. Her ability to speak makes the injustice visible, yet it does not give her control over the judgement. Gauri, by contrast, has a much more restricted opportunity to shape the action. The audience encounters her through the decisions and language of men. These are not two degrees of the same experience. They are different forms of unequal agency: one woman is allowed to speak within a structure that discredits her, while the other is largely denied control over the arrangement that defines her future.

The plays also use different dramatic methods to expose hypocrisy. *Silence!* turns a mock trial into a social ritual. Its courtroom form shows how a group can make prejudice appear lawful or reasonable. *Ghashiram Kotwal* uses songs, the Sutradhar, and the chorus to comment on public behaviour and expose the distance between official status and private desire. In both plays, theatrical form encourages the audience to question the authority of those who claim to represent morality or order. The difference is that *Silence!* places the audience close to the experience of public humiliation, while *Ghashiram Kotwal* connects gendered exploitation with a broader political spectacle.

The comparison also complicates the idea of resistance. Benare's attempts to defend herself show that she does not simply accept the group's judgement, but the social power of the trial limits the effect of her words. Gauri's situation offers fewer visible opportunities for resistance because the men around her control the major decisions. Neither case supports the idea that speaking or remaining silent can be evaluated apart from the conditions in which a woman acts. The question is not whether one character is inherently stronger than the other; it is how the structures around each character shape the possibilities available to her.

Finally, the plays reveal that patriarchy can be maintained by different groups and institutions. In *Silence!*, ordinary people reproduce social rules by judging Benare and treating her private life as a public concern. In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, family relations, caste privilege, and political authority create a setting in which Gauri can be used for male advancement. This comparison adds to feminist readings of Tendulkar by showing that women's oppression is not limited to a single setting or a single type of man. It can appear as moral concern, paternal care, public administration, or political negotiation. What connects these forms is the unequal distribution of the right to decide.

Conclusion

This paper has compared the representation of women and patriarchal power in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is in Session* and *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The analysis shows that the plays represent different forms of gendered control. In *Silence!*, Benare's private life is turned into a public trial, and the language of morality becomes a means of humiliation. The group's conduct reveals a double standard in which the woman bears the public consequences of a sexual relationship while the man involved avoids comparable scrutiny. Benare can speak, but she cannot control the process that judges her.

In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Gauri's vulnerability is connected to the ambitions of her father and the political authority of Nana Phadnavis. The play's historical and musical form exposes the links between caste hierarchy, political patronage, and sexual exploitation. Ghashiram's transformation from a humiliated outsider into an authoritarian official show that suffering does not necessarily produce justice. A person who has experienced oppression may reproduce it when power becomes available. Gauri's treatment reveals the cost of that transformation for a woman whose future is subordinated to male ambition.

The central finding is that patriarchy operates through more than direct male force. It is supported by social judgement, family expectations, public institutions, and political arrangements that make unequal treatment seem normal or necessary. Benare's experience is shaped by a group that claims moral authority; Gauri's is shaped by a political exchange in which men control the terms. Their experiences are not identical, but together they show how women's dignity and agency can be

limited in different ways. The comparison contributes a focused perspective to existing scholarship by bringing public moral policing into dialogue with political and familial exploitation. Tendulkar's plays ask readers to question not only the actions of individual men but also the social arrangements that allow those actions to be justified, repeated, and protected.

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