

Silence! The Court is in Session



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIJAY TENDULKAR

Vijay Tendulkar was born in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, a city in southwest India roughly two hundred miles south of Mumbai. Tendulkar dropped out of school at age 14 to participate in the movement for Indian independence. Although no longer in school, Tendulkar still enjoyed reading and writing. He began working for newspapers, often taking the role of social critic who wrote in defense of the oppressed and marginalized. He also wrote plays, and although his first two were subject to little public attention, his third play, *Srimant*, proved more popular if also more controversial. He continued to write dozens of plays, one-acts, and screenplays throughout his life, as well as translations, journalism, short stories, literary essays, and novels.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Silence! the Court is in Session takes place in post-Independence India. India was part of the British Empire until 1947, at which point it became an independent nation, although it still belonged to the greater British Commonwealth. In 1950, the ratification of a constitution allowed India to become its own democratic country. Indian feminism took a different path than American feminism. Women mobilized for the Indian freedom movement under British rule, but after independence in 1947 women's rights often took a backseat to questions regarding the future of the independent nation. After independence, activists focused on a woman's right to work outside of the home, an issue brought to light in *Silence!* and a source of many of the characters' resentment of Benare, a working woman.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Silence! the Court is in Session is based on the 1956 Swiss novel *Die Panne*, known as *A Dangerous Game* in English. Other courtroom dramas include [Twelve Angry Men](#), whose teleplay predated both *Silence!* and *A Dangerous Game*, as well as 1989's *A Few Good Men*. A later play that involves a blurring of the line between real life, drama, and history include *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Südwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Silence! the Court is in Session*
- **When Written:** 1963

- **Where Written:** Mumbai
- **When Published:** 1967
- **Literary Period:** Modern Drama
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** A community center in a village in India
- **Climax:** The discovery that Benare and Damle did have an affair
- **Antagonist:** Every character except for Benare and Samant

EXTRA CREDIT

Translation. *Silence!* was originally published in Marathi, Tendulkar's native language, and one of India's 23 official languages.

Long Legacy. Tendulkar's 1972 play *Ghashiram Kotwal* (or *Ghashiram the Constable*) is one of the longest running plays in the world and has been performed more 6,000 times around the globe.



PLOT SUMMARY

Leela Benare arrives at a meeting hall in a small Indian village where she and a handful of colleagues will perform a Living Courtroom for the villagers. Benare arrives early with a villager, Samant, who helps her unlock the building, and chats with her as they wait for the rest of the troop to arrive. Benare, unbeknownst to her colleagues and to the audience, is unmarried and newly pregnant. She has also been fired from her job as a school teacher, as her bosses worried her pregnancy was a sign of immorality, which she would pass on to the children.

Sukhatme, Rokde, Ponkshe, Karnik, Mr. Kashikar, and Mrs. Kashikar arrive at the meeting hall. Two members of the troop, Professor Damle and Mr. Rawte, were unable to make it to the performance. Although longtime collaborators, each member of the group is constantly making jabs at the others, trying to assert his or her authority.

With several hours until they are meant to perform, the troop members decide to improvise a trial as they wait. They decide to keep most of the roles the same—Sukhatme plays the lawyer, Kashikar the judge—but designate a new defendant. Benare is out of the room during the discussion, and so, without her input, is nominated as the accused. Ponkshe and Karnik likely know that something is wrong in Benare's personal life, perhaps related to pregnancy, and so maliciously suggest she be charged with infanticide.

Benare begins the trial combative and mischievous, which causes her collaborators to chide her to be serious. However, as the trial carries on and begins to converge with her personal life, causing her to become upset, Benare's collaborators remind her it is just a game. Many members of the troop have been quietly judgmental of Benare's lifestyle as an unmarried, outspoken woman, and use this trial as an opportunity to criticize her and progressive Indian politics generally.

The trial heats up when Rokde reveals that (in real life) he went to Damle's house one afternoon and saw Benare inside. Samant then fabricates a scenario taken from a novel, in which Benare has become pregnant after having an affair with Damle. However, Benare's distressed response reveals that he's hit upon the truth—Benare is, in fact, pregnant with Damle's child and has been desperately trying to find a way to ensure a happy future for her baby.

As troop realizes that their fictional trial has a grain of truth within it, the players become more serious. Benare, upset, tries to leave but the room has been locked from the outside, and she has no choice other than endure the rest of the trial. Over the next hour Rokde, Ponshe, and Karnik reveal details of her personal life for the sake of the "game." Ponshe and Rokde reveal that Benare approached him asking him to marry her and raise her child, but both men turned her down.

The trial concludes as Sukhatme makes a case against Benare, arguing that she has corrupted society and the very institution of motherhood. Kashikar gives Benare ten seconds to give a rebuttal, and time freezes as Benare gives the speech she wishes she had the time or courage to give—about her search for love, her love of teaching, and her commitment to raising her baby. Time unfreezes as Kashikar deliver's Benare's punishment—a court ordered abortion. Devastated, she collapses to the floor.

The court snaps back to reality as villagers unlock the door from the outside and trickle in. The men who have been deeply embodying their roles as judge and lawyer suddenly remember who they really are. The whole group goes to Benare, still lifeless on the floor and try to remind her it was just a game, but they cannot rally her. They leave to prepare for their evening performance, and Benare remains alone onstage.

somehow pass on her immorality to her students. Now, pregnant and unemployed, Benare is committed to figuring out a way to make a life for herself and her unborn child. She's asked some of her courtroom collaborators, Ponshe and Rokde, to marry her and help her raise her child, but has been rejected. She understands the stigma both she and her child will face if it is born without a father and worries about how to move forward. The stress Benare is under in her personal life comes to the surface when Kashikar jokingly charges her with infanticide during an improvised mock trial. Over the course of this trial Benare's real troubles are brought to light, and her collaborators and ostensible friends take the opportunity to insult what they see as her loose, immoral, progressive lifestyle. At the end of the play, although her castmates collect themselves and try to tell her that her prosecution was just a game, Benare has been totally emotionally broken.

Samant – Raghunath Bhikaji Samant is a local villager who helps the members of the Living Courtroom find the meeting hall and set up. He remains in the room throughout their improvised trial, even serving as a witness and delivering a made-up piece of evidence. Samant often acts as an audience surrogate, allowing other characters to explain the workings of the court or the relationships between each of them. Samant is kind if clueless; early in the play Benare attempts to hit on him and he fails to understand her advances. Samant, unlike many of the other characters, thinks Benare seems kind and competent, and does not judge her for being in her thirties and unmarried, or for having a job and earning her own independent income. Samant is also the only character to show Benare any kindness, defending her in the context of the trial, and leaving her a small gift of a cloth **parrot** in the play's final scene.

Sukhatme – A central member of the Living Courtroom, in which he typically plays the lawyer for the prosecution. However, since both Damle and Rawte are absent on this particular day, he also acts as the lawyer for the defense. Sukhatme also works as a lawyer outside of the troop, although his practice is not successful. He enjoys having power in the fictional Living Courtroom, which he does not have in life.

Ponshe – A failed academic who works as a clerk and is a member of the Living Courtroom. Gopal N. Ponshe is insecure about his professional status but tries to elevate himself by insulting and degrading those around him. Ponshe is unmarried, and a few days before the events of the play, Benare asked him if he would marry her and raise her unborn child. Ponshe saw Benare's request as an insult, a sign that she doesn't respect him and believes he doesn't respect himself. Of course, Benare likely asked out of desperation and because she hoped he would have empathy for her situation. Ponshe is the only member of the cast, aside from Benare, who knows Damle is the father of her child. He reveals this as a witness during the mock trial.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Benare – The play's protagonist, Leela Benare is an unmarried teacher in her early thirties and a member of the cast of the Living Courtroom. Benare has been carrying on an affair with Professor Damle, another member of the cast; after she became pregnant, however, he cut her off. Benare has also recently been fired from her job, as her superiors view unmarried motherhood as sinful and worried she would

Mr. Kashikar – The husband of Mrs. Kashikar and a central member of the Living Courtroom, in which he plays the judge. Kashikar is a social worker in his real life and takes great pride in his job and the status it affords him. He and his wife have no children but have taken on Rokde as a ward and unpaid servant. Kashikar is intensely critical of Rokde as well as his wife, Mrs. Kashikar, abusing her essentially every time she speaks. He is also critical of his fellow players and intensely skeptical of the women's independence movement in India, using Benare's trial as a way to criticize working women generally, and, in his mind, the breakdown of society because of women who refuse to marry and engage in behaviors he sees as immoral.

Mrs. Kashikar – The wife of Mr. Kashikar and a supporting member of the Living Courtroom. Although critical like her husband, Mrs. Kashikar has to endure near constant verbal abuse from Kashikar, who publically mocks and chastises her for essentially everything she does or says. Benare and others gossip that Mrs. Kashikar desperately wanted children but was unable to conceive, and so her and Kashikar's ward, Rokde, acts as a kind of surrogate child, although he doubles as their servant, and Mrs. Kashikar seems to take out much of her aggression on him.

Balu Rokde – Balu Rodke is a young man who lives with Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar. The couple paid for Rokde's education and serve as a kind of foster family. Rokde is indebted to them, acting as their unpaid servant. Rokde is also one of the lowest status members of the cast, a fact which is well aware; he is frequently ordered around not only by the Kashikars, but by other members of the troop. Before the events of the play, Benare approached Rokde asking him to marry her and to help her raise her unborn child. Rokde refused—out of fear that he'd be publically shamed, and out of fear of Mrs. Kashikar, who controls much of his life and behavior.

Karnik – A professional actor and member of the Living Courtroom. Although he joins in with Sukhatme, Mr. Kashikar, and Ponshe in tormenting Benare, he seems to have less of a personal, emotional stake in the outcome of the trial, perhaps because he is less conservative politically than Kashikar or Sukhatme, who see the trial as a referendum on independent women.

Professor Damle – A member of the Living Courtroom in his spare time and an academic professionally. Damle has a wife and five children, however he nonetheless began an affair with Benare that has resulted in her pregnancy. Benare later complains that, although he is an intellectual, Damle was only ever interested in her body and not her mind. When she revealed her pregnancy to him he refused to help her, concerned only with preserving his own family and future. Damle is not in attendance on the day of the trial, likely to avoid an additional confrontation with Benare.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rawte – A member of the Living Courtroom who is sick on the day of this particular trial.

Nanasaheb Shinde – The Mumbai-based Chairman of the Education Society. He also has an interest in social work. Based on a conversation Mr. Kashikar claims to have overheard, Nanasaheb is likely the man who decided to fire Benare, on account of the perceived immorality of her unmarried motherhood.

Benare's Uncle – As a young girl Benare fell in love with her uncle, as he was kinder to her than her parents. Her uncle and mother opposed the relationship, however, and, feeling betrayed, Benare attempted suicide.

Servant – A servant who appears briefly at the beginning of the play to help load in props for the Living Courtroom.

TERMS

Schoolmarm – A female teacher. However, the term suggests an older, conservative, and strict woman.

Living Courtroom – A performance in which actors reenact a famous trial from the past.

Tukaram – A devotional Hindu poet.

Masala Pan – A drug made from the leaf of the betel plant. When chewed it has stimulant effects.

Sahib – A polite formal title, or honorific, for a man.

Bhagavad-Geeta – Also translated as the Bhagavad-Gita, and often referred to as the Gita, this is a piece of Hindu scripture. Although only one piece of a larger body of important Hindu texts, the Gita was often used as inspiration for members of the Indian independence movement.

Agarkar and Dhonodo Keshav Karve – Two Indian social reformers born in the mid 1800s. Gopal Ganesh Agarkar campaigned for education reform, the abolition of the Indian cast system, and for the increase of the marriage age for children. Karve campaigned for women's welfare, specifically education, increased literacy, and the remarriage of widows, as well as the abolition of the caste system.

Infanticide – The killing of an infant.

Tik-20 – A bed bug poison, that is also poisonous to humans.

Dock – The part of a courtroom where the accused sits. It is generally composed of a bench or a chair and surrounded by a fence or cage-like railing.

Brahmin – The highest Indian caste. Although the term is never explicitly used in the play, many of its characters are implied to be Brahmins. These characters are middle class in the traditional sense—well off, but concerned with class and status.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



PERFORMANCE AND SELF EXPRESSION

Silence! The Court is in Session is a play within a play, as a group of amateur theatre actors (known as “Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive

Association’s Mock Lawcourt”) assemble to present a mock-trial of “social importance” in order to spread “enlightenment.” On the day *Silence!* takes place, instead of presenting a pre-planned case, they decide to improvise, accusing one of their own, Leela Benare, of infanticide. Through this performance, a play-acted court investigating a fictionalized crime reveals the unmarried Benare’s very real secret pregnancy. Under normal circumstances (i.e. in real life), the court forces its audiences to engage with moral issues and contemporary news items, but the play-acted court that adjourns in *Silence!* instead becomes a means to harass and embarrass one of the members of its troop. Uncomfortable with discussing Benare’s condition explicitly, instead the members of the troop hide behind the mask of “theatre” in order to dig into and criticize Benare’s personal life. Performances, songs, and poems throughout the play reveal what characters are unable to express in everyday life, exposing their inner thoughts and feelings.

Benare, a schoolteacher, often recites bits of songs and poems that she has taught her classes. These pieces of verse reflect her own inner thoughts, which she is unwilling, or unable, to express directly. Early in the play, Benare sings a song in English (the play was originally written in Marathi) describing a sweetheart and a secret: “He wants to marry me. / But Mummy says, I’m too little / To have thoughts such as these.” Benare, secretly pregnant, is also secretly looking for a husband who could help prevent her from becoming an unmarried mother. However, this song also links back to her childhood trauma, when she fell in love with an uncle who manipulated and then abandoned her. At another point in the play Benare sings a song about a **sparrow** whose eyes are red from crying because “someone has stolen [its] nest away.” Benare, likely, feels like this sparrow—abandoned by her child’s father and in danger of losing her job because of her pregnancy. Benare is in fact at risk of losing everything in her life important to her, a thought she will not express out loud but will say in song. Through performance, Benare is able to grapple with private desires and painful traumas that she can’t express in other ways.

Stage performances also offer characters the opportunity to become what they long to be. Kashikar and Sukhatme in

particular become their characters during the mock trial. Sukhatme dons a lawyer’s robe and Kashikar a judge’s wig. When the trial becomes more serious in the third act, Kashikar adds a black judge’s gown that the stage directions note increase his “Gravity and dignity.” Sukhatme is a failed lawyer and so likely appreciates being able to actually try a case, however ostensibly fictitious. The power-hungry Kashikar meanwhile and enjoys having authority over an entire courtroom. Rokde, servant to Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar, desperately wants to be allowed to participate in the play and sees an opportunity when other cast members do not show up to the rehearsal. Given little status and independence in his daily life, this offers him a potential to be, for a moment, important and free. He already knows the lines of one of the other men by heart, but is rejected by Karnik, Kashikar, and Mrs. Kashikar.

The play-acted trial itself is a way to for the central characters to attack Benare’s life and choices without actually attacking her. Although everyone pretends it is just a game, the accusations and emotions are real; the stage becomes a platform for the actors to express their thoughts and feelings that go unspoken in day-to-day life. Sukhatme repeatedly reminds the group “it’s a game. Just a game, that’s all.” Benare, too, tries to push back and joke, but it is difficult for her to perform nonchalance when her real life is on trial. Still, it is Sukhatme who, a few pages later, argues that the group “need[s] seriousness” to proceed with their trial, undermining his earlier assertion that the trial unfolding onstage is purely fictitious.

A blurry line thus exists between performance and reality. Midway through the play, Sukhatme asks Karnik about his “opinion of the prisoner’s conduct.” Karnik clarifies, “Do you mean, in this mock trial, or in real life?” Sukhatme responds, “In real life, of course.” Kashikar suggest they stick to the trial, but the confusion has already begun. Kashikar pushes back later that they’re getting “onto too personal a level,” but, at least initially, no one seems to understand why Benare is “getting into such a state” when her personal life is used in performance. Eventually, when Benare becomes so emotional that she must leave the room, the group realizes the mock trial has struck a chord and that they are in fact pursuing a real “crime,” or at the very least a real instance of unwed motherhood. Ponkshe, Rokde, and Karnik had already suspected Benare’s pregnancy, but her emotional response confirms their suspicions. At the play’s conclusion, a villager interrupts the verdict and everyone breaks character except for Benare. Mrs. Kashikar comments that Benare has “taken it really to heart. How sensitive the child is!” For most of the players, the performance of the trial has given them the opportunity to confirm information about Benare they’d already suspected. For Benare, the trial is a devastating probe into her personal life, made possible only because of the framing of it as a theatrical exercise.

Theatre, poems, and songs within the play thus allow characters to express hidden truths and emotions. By performing as someone else, even someone similar to him or herself (as in Sukhatme's case) characters are able to be more aggressive, more inquiring. However, the lines between performance and reality are not always clear; for Benare's fellow players the trial is a kind of game, but for Benare her real life is being laid out for everyone to critique, and the theatrical exercise proves as emotionally devastating and trying as a real trial would be.



WOMEN'S ROLES IN SOCIETY

Silence! The Court is in Session takes place in India during the mid 1900s, a time when women were entering the workforce but many people, men and women alike, still held traditional views of gender roles—men earned money and were allowed to move and behave independently, while women were relegated to domestic tasks like child-rearing. *Silence!* contains just two named female characters, Leela Benare, a single (but pregnant) teacher and independent spirit, and Mrs. Kashikar, a married woman in late middle age. The two women are opposites, one leading a relatively progressive life, the other a traditional one. The characters in the play turn against Benare because of her liberal lifestyle, reflecting the reality that, during the 1960s in India, independent women like Benare were perceived as a threat to be contained. The play reveals that mainstream middle-class society was not ready to accept those who, like her, represented a new progressive future.

The conservative cast of *Silence!* often brings up the importance of motherhood during the mock trial in order to shame Benare for the false charge of infanticide. Their praise of motherhood is distinctly *not* a praise of women in general, but rather an attempt to keep women in line with their prescribed role in society. Sukhatme, a lawyer in real life and in their mock-trial, claims that “motherhood is a sacred thing,” something “pure” that “our culture enjoins us to the perpetual worship” of the mother figure. He adds that mothers are meant to weave “a magic circle with her whole existence in order to protect and preserve her little one.” Kashikar, who plays the judge in the mock-trial, recites a poem that says, “Mother and / The Motherland, / Both are even / Higher than heaven.” Although ostensibly praise, by treating the prototypical mother as essentially divine, she is robbed of free will, stripped of her ability to make mistakes or live a life that others do not see as “pure”—that is, a life that goes against the grain of tradition and social propriety.

Sukhatme thus argues that Benare “has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood.” Though this is done in the mock trial, it resonates with Benare's real life situation as a woman pregnant out of wedlock. Her “crime” is made worse by her intention to raise the child while unmarried, thereby

asserting a sense of feminine independence. Whether or not the characters are all aware of Benare's situation, there is clearly genuine resentment bolstering their savage mock trial attacks. The other characters see Benare—an unwed yet content and independent woman in her thirties—as a subversion of cultural norms and criticize her over the course of the play for running “after men too much” and acting outside the “moral conduct of a normal unmarried woman.” Although they rarely say it explicitly, they also assume motherhood takes place only within the context of marriage, and fear that, if women begin to have children outside of marriage, the whole institution—including men's authority—will crumble.

Women's bodies are also constantly discussed throughout the play, and the men (and even the traditional Mrs. Kashikar) clearly have little respect for Benare's bodily autonomy. For one thing, they decide she will be the accused in their mock-trial despite her wishes. Later, the men notably declare that the proper punishment for Benare (now accused, in a moment of reality and performance blurring, of becoming pregnant of out wedlock) is to be forced to get an abortion—robbing her of any agency whatsoever and shaming her by denying her the right to fulfill her supposed destiny as a woman. Ironically, Benare herself is somewhat excited by the idea of having a child. Yet the men around her take the one thing women are supposedly respected for—the ability to give birth—and use it as leverage towards their own ends.

Similarly, in her final monologue a distraught Benare expresses her anger that the father of her child, Professor Damle was only interested in her body during their affair. “Again, the body!” she screams. “This body is traitor. 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.” declares, “only one thing in life is all-important—the body!” While resenting the fact that her body in this society is treated as the domain of men, Benare tries to reclaim a sense of power by appreciating her body's ability to carry her son. And by committing to raising her child alone, Benare is implicitly fighting back against India's repressive ideas of womanhood.

As much as Benare struggles as someone who has not followed the traditional path for women, choosing not to get married and choosing to get a job, *Silence!* depicts the lives of more traditional women as unenviable alternatives. Kashikar has little respect for his wife, seeing her as his property who he expects to be subservient to him. He constantly criticizes her and talks down to her, and gives her very little autonomy. When she proposes being the accused in the mock-trial, Kashikar tells her “No!” and complains that “she can't get among a few people without wanting to show off!” A showoff himself, Kashikar likely resents being occasionally overshadowed by a woman he doesn't respect. When Benare won't reveal her age in court, the men and Mrs. Kashikar mock her, overestimating her age as an insult. Mrs. Kashikar judges her to be “over thirty-two” by

looking at her face, but when she won't answer, they write it down as "not less than thirty-four." The men of the court also mock her by asking "how [she] came to stay unmarried to such a mature—such an advanced—age?" They dislike that she's independent past the traditional age of marriage and attempt to shame her for it. The men resent Benare's freedom. They complain, "She's free allright—in everything!" implying that she's a sexually loose woman, which they relate to her unmarried status and her career. Sukhatme meanwhile argues that a "woman is not fit for independence," explicitly stating what the assembled cast has been dancing around.

Benare is an independent woman, who is punished for her independence. In a society slowly shifting away from traditional gender roles, she is a pioneer, who struggles to pave a path for herself and her unborn child. Although harassed and degraded, Benare is depicted as strong and just.



MIDDLE CLASS STATUS, TRADITION, AND PROPRIETY

The characters that make up the cast of *Silence! The Court is in Session* are primarily middle-class working men and women. Although living comfortably, they are nonetheless obsessed with status, and much of the play involves the cast subtly fighting for superiority. This infighting is depicted as petty, and status as less important than solid values and a sense of right and wrong. Middle-class society is shown to be a restrictive trap. While it provides comfort for the individuals within it, it also creates a stressful environment in which people fight for limited power and prestige, ignoring their own happiness and the happiness and wellbeing of those around them.

To the middle-class protagonists, status and profession are incredibly important. They use their jobs as weapons and tools, in order to elevate themselves above their peers. Benare, for example, is a teacher. She is resistant to being called a schoolmarm by Samant both because it implies she is prudish and harsh as a teacher and also because it devalues and genders the important work she does. Benare enjoys being a teacher because of the status it gives her, but realizes the respect afforded to her by her class makes other teachers and professionals jealous, which Benare tells Samant explicitly in Act One.

Early in the play, Benare also describes her fellow actors and their professions with amusement and disdain. Sukhatme is a real lawyer who also play acts as one with the troop, but Benare jokes "he's such an authority on the subject even a desperate client won't go anywhere near him." Still, he does his best to use his job to elevate his position, taking control during the mock trial and relishing the power he has to call witnesses and manipulate Benare's emotions. Similarly, Benare and Sukhatme mock Ponkshe as a "Sci-en-tist! Inter-failed!"; he trained in

science but was unable to attain a degree. Ponkshe now works as a clerk in the Central Telegraph Office and is clearly "irritated," as noted by stage directions, by his collaborators' jabs. He takes pride in his status as an almost-scientist, arguing that at least, unlike Rokde, a servant for the Kashikar family, he hasn't asked for charity from others and has only wasted his own family's money. The group also flexes their own status by comparing themselves to Rokde, the lowest ranking of the group, as well as ordering around Samant, a local villager who has come to help the troop.

Order and tradition are solidly middle-class values, and the characters at the center of the play (with the exception of Benare) are obsessed with maintaining law and order. Respect of institutions is incredibly important, especially respect of the court. The title of the play itself—*Silence! The Court is in Session*—alludes to the importance of the court above all else. In addition to her other crimes, Benare is often held in contempt of court, for speaking out of turn and for criticizing the way Kashikar and Sukhatme run things. Unsurprisingly, given the gender dynamics within the world of the play, when the men interrupt each other, they are not censored, but when Mrs. Kashikar or Benare speak up, they're criticized. Kashikar offers reprimands to Benare for "abrogating the authority of counsel, and for obstructing the due process of law."

Similarly, institutions like family, motherhood, and marriage are heavily monitored and enforced. Early in the trial, Sukhatme, Kashikar, and Mrs. Kashikar all give examples of the importance of motherhood and family structure. Kashikar calls motherhood "higher than heaven," while Sukhatme describes it as "a sacred thing." However, instead of granting actual respect to mothers, this thinking robs them of power. Motherhood becomes an institution governed by the state, which has a stake in the wellbeing of the children and citizens being produced by its mothers. Men like Kashikar and Sukhatme revere traditional motherhood because it presents another means to control women in society.

Marriage is another highly-respected institution that gives status and privilege to the individuals within it, yet the collected actors all mock and question Benare's attempts to get married. Marriage, like motherhood, is a means of societal control specifically of women, and as such seems antithetical to Benare's progressive and independent existence. Yet Benare understands that life as an unwed mother will not be accepted by most of society, and as such does her best to find a husband before her pregnancy begins to show. This search for husband is used by her castmates as proof of her depravity, when all she wants is to be able to blend into society and live happily—that is, she is actually trying to adhere to the dictates of order and tradition that define her social class.

Benare flirts with Samant in the play's opening, making excuses to get close to him and ask about his marital status but pulls away when he displays "complete innocence." Benare also asks

Ponkshe to marry her, as well as Rokde, propositions which she hopes will protect her but are merely used by Ponkshe, Rokde, and the assembled court to mock and trap her in their trial. The only married couple physically present is Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar. Yet even as they act as though their marital status makes them superior to the unwed Benare, their marriage appears to be extremely toxic. Benare describes the couple as “Mr. Prime Objective” and “Mrs. Hand-That-Rocks-The-Cradle,” arguing that Mr. Kashikar is obsessed with status and his own importance whereas Mrs. Kashikar wants to be a homemaker but is unable to have children.

Ironically, although obsessed with tradition, the majority of the cast is more concerned with how important they *appear* than with how they treat their so-called friends and colleagues. A social status that should in theory ensure a lifetime of comfort instead creates great stresses and miniscule divisions along fault lines in profession, upbringing, and lifestyle.



GUILT AND INNOCENCE

The play is centered on a mock-trial, which, although ostensibly fictional, ends up prosecuting one of the actors, Benare, for a real “crime”—being an unwed mother. However, although the members of the mock-trial’s cast claim to be investigating a fabricated crime, they are genuinely concerned with law and order. The point of their mock-trial, which tours the countryside and generally is based on historical cases, is to bring causes of “social significance” to the attention of the public and to educate an audience in morality. However, while claiming to be on the side of morality over the course of their trial, the cast unfairly persecutes Benare, perverting the meaning of guilt and innocence. Their cruelty towards Benare reveals how they’ve mistaken retribution for subjective crimes for true justice and social good. Benare’s peers are clearly less concerned with true justice than they are with petty punishment.

The actors in the mock-trial claim they have a responsibility for social good. Early on, the men at the center of the play, specifically Ponkshe and Karnik—who notably have first and second-hand knowledge of Benare’s pregnancy—decide to change the trial from one about nuclear weapons to one about infanticide. Although an about face from their original trial, this is still a charge of “social significance” in India. Kashikar argues the charge of infanticide is “important from the social point of view,” and that in choosing it he was “consider[ing] society’s best interests.” Yet instead of *teaching* the audience about morality, this play is instead intended to *punish* Benare—who is in pregnant out of wedlock and as such a threat to the men’s image of a moral society. Kashikar comments, after Samant gives some (fabricated) evidence about seeing Benare with Professor Damle, that “the whole fabric of society is being soiled these days [...] Nothing is undefiled anymore.” So severe is the charge that, in Benare’s sentencing, Kashikar argues that

the crimes Benare has committed cannot be forgiven. Thus, despite the troop’s purported mission, there is no possibility for education in this trial: there is only punishment.

Indeed, the members of the mock-trial are less interested in allocating blame than they are in breaking down Benare specifically, mistaking cruel retribution for genuine justice and confusing their desire to punish an independent woman with a desire to actually improve the society they live in. Benare recognizes that Professor Damle (the father of her child) is just as guilty as she is, remarking early in the play “he’s not here today. Won’t be coming either. He wouldn’t dare!”

Unfortunately, she is the only one who seems to understand that her pregnancy is not the result of her actions alone. Sukhatme and Mrs. Kashikar insists that “Professor Damle is a family man,” whereas Benare is never referred to with positive terms. That they do not blame him equally for impregnating Benare underscores how little they care about actual fairness or justice.

This double standard has been true throughout Benare’s life. As a teenager she was seduced by and had a relationship with her maternal uncle. Although contemporary readers will recognize the power imbalance between a predatory adult man and a teenage girl, Benare’s castmates (and much of society) place the blame on her. Benare is devastated by the dissolution of this relationship and tries to end her life after her uncle leaves her. Even so, her castmates remain unsympathetic, arguing that her past is “smeared in sin.” Again, their perception of guilt and innocence has clearly been warped to reflect decidedly unjust societal norms.

The members of the mock-trial are so concerned with the consequences of alleged misbehavior that they fail to instill any actual “social good” through their performance. They only want to punish Benare for her perceived crimes, and do not realize that the guilt and shame she already feels are doing the work for them. In a scene that Samant invents when he is called to testify—a scene that actually seems to detail a *real* interaction Benare had with Professor Damle—Benare cries, “if you abandon me, I shall have no choice but to take my life.” Samant knows what Benare also senses: how difficult life is for unwed mothers, how few options are available to her, and how unkindly society will treat her and her child. Benare carries a bottle of Tik-20 in her bag, a powerful poison that she plans to use to commit suicide if she cannot find another way out of her troubles. She understands the social consequences of her pregnancy and contemplates killing herself, calculating that death might be easier than a life as a “sinner.” Such a “punishment” is horrifically disproportionate with her “crime.”

Still, those around Benare repeatedly emphasize the gravity of her transgression. Kashikar notes that he overheard the chairman of the education society, Nanasaheb, discussing Benare on the phone and saying, “it is a sin to be pregnant before marriage. It would be still more immoral to let such a

woman teach, in such condition! There is no alternative—this woman must be dismissed.” Benare is punished not only socially, but professionally for her pregnancy. Sukhatme argues, “Tit for tat! As you sow, so shall you reap [...] that’s the rule of life,” essentially arguing that women’s jobs are to uphold the values of society—that is, to ensure social good—and so by becoming pregnant outside of marriage, Benare is actively degrading society and therefore deserves punishment.

Benare senses this injustice, however. Regarding being fired from her job, she wonders, “for what sin are they robbing me of my job?” She adds, “I did not teach any of this to those young, tender souls. I swallowed that poison, but didn’t even let a drop touch them.” She knows she was a good teacher, but unfortunately many believe that she will pass on her “sin” to her students. Whatever genuine social good she accomplished in the classroom is, in the eyes of society, outweighed by her guilt. This, in turn, points to a deeply regressive and misguided conception of justice in this world—one that focuses on the shallow appearance of morality at the cost of actual compassion.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SPARROWS

Sparrows are representative of Benare herself, and more specifically of the devastation she feels at the prospect of losing her child and her livelihood. Twice in the play Benare sings the same song involving the birds, presumably one she learned as a child and now sings to her students. The full song goes, “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 . . .” The song explicitly maps on to Benare’s own troubles. Like the sparrow, much of her security (or nest) has been stolen from her; Benare no longer has a job and has little chance of finding a husband. Additionally, during the trial, when Mr. Kashikar decides on a punishment for Benare’s unmarried motherhood, he decides she must end her pregnancy. Although this trial has no actual legal grounding, the threat of the death of her unborn child traumatizes Benare and further mirrors the stealing of the sparrow’s nest. The parrot in the song can most easily be mapped onto Samant, who carries with him a cloth parrot and is the most sympathetic of any of the characters to Benare’s plight. The crow, meanwhile, who is uninterested in the sparrow’s trouble, is reflective of the rest of

the characters in the play: Kashikar, Mrs. Kashikar, Ponshe, Sukhatme, Karnik, and Rokde. These men and women, although ostensibly friends and colleagues of Benare, have no interest in helping her with her troubles and instead antagonize her further.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Five Plays* published in 1996.

Act One Quotes

☝ SAMANT. [...] I mean to say, I’m not in the habit of walking so fast. You do set a very lively pace, very lively.

BENARE. Not always. But today, how I walked! Let’s leave everyone behind, I thought, and go somewhere far, far away—with you!

SAMANT [*in confusion*]. With me?

BENARE. Yes, I like you very much.

SAMANT [*terribly shy and embarrassed*]. Tut-tut. Ha ha! I’m hardly...

BENARE. You’re very nice indeed. And shall I tell you something? You are a very pure and good person. I like you.

SAMANT [*incredulously*]. Me?

Related Characters: Benare, Samant (speaker), Ponshe, Balu Rokde

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In the play’s first scene, Samant and Benare arrive at the meeting hall ahead of the rest of the theatre troop. Unbeknownst to the audience and Samant, Benare is pregnant. As an unmarried and recently unemployed woman, she fears for her future and the future of her baby. In an attempt to protect herself and her child, she is on the lookout for a husband who could support them both, and she eyes Samant as a potential candidate.

Throughout the play other characters (Ponshe, Rokde) will reveal that Benare had proposed to them, hoping they cared enough for her (or pitied her enough) to marry her and raise another man’s child. Unfortunately, both men rejected Benare, and now she must scramble to find a husband who can help support her. Whereas Ponshe

understood that Benare's masked attempts at finding a husband for her "friend" were really about her, and she asked Rokde directly about marriage, Samant is completely oblivious to Benare's flirting. Slightly later in the scene she tries to move closer to him, but "perhaps as a response to his complete innocence, she moves away from him."

Life as an unmarried woman, and especially as an unmarried mother, is brutal. Benare knows her life is essentially over if she cannot convince a man to marry her before the birth of her child, and so is doing her best, with the few tools she has (her intelligence, her charm, and presumably—though never explicitly stated – her beauty).

●● BENARE. In school, when the first bell rings, my foot's already on the threshold. I haven't heard 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 any one!

SAMANT. You're a schoolmarm, it seems?

BENARE. No, a teacher! Do I seem the complete schoolmarm to you? SAMANT. No, no... I didn't mean it like that...

BENARE. Say it if you like...

SAMANT. But I didn't say it at all! A schoolmarm just means ... someone who—teaches—instructs!—children—that's what I meant to say...

BENARE. They're so much better than adults. At least they don't have that blind pride of thinking they know everything. There's no nonsense stuffed in their heads. They don't scratch you till you bleed, then run away like cowards.

Related Characters: Samant, Benare (speaker), Ponshe

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Benare, who has recently been fired (which neither Samant nor the audience knows), has spent much of her adult life invested in her work. She identifies as a teacher and is unable to exist outside of this identity. She also feels the need to emphasize how good she was at her work, both as a rebuke to her superiors who fired her and as a way to signal her value in her middleclass circles.

Benare dislikes the term schoolmarm because it paints an unflattering picture of who she is and what she does.

Schoolmarm implies an older woman—a spinster who is strict and unlikable. Benare is still in her early thirties, young and full of energy and passion; to call her a schoolmarm is a profound insult. Later in the play Ponshe describes Benare as a "teacher. In other words, a schoolmarm." To which Benare responds "But I'm still quite young!" This clarifies that, to Benare, the term schoolmarm implies an unflattering maturity. Additionally, as Benare is actively seeking a husband, being a schoolmarm would suggest she is too old too marry and start a family, and too old to be desirable as a wife.

●● BENARE. I'm used to standing while teaching. In class, I never sit when teaching. That's how I keep my eye on the whole class. No one has a chance to play up. My class is scared stiff of me! And they adore me, too. My children will do anything for me. For I'd give the last drop of my blood to teach them. *[In a different tone]*. That's why people are jealous. Specially the other teachers and the management. But what can they do to me? What can they do? However hard they try, what can they do? They're holding an enquiry, if you please! But my teaching's perfect. I've put my 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? Throw me out? Let them! I haven't hurt anyone. Anyone at all! If I've hurt anybody, it's been myself. But is that any kind of reason for throwing me out? Who are these people to say what I can or can't do? My life is my own—I haven't sold it to anyone for a job! My will is my own. My wishes are my own. No one can kill those—no one! I'll do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide ...

Related Characters: Benare (speaker), Samant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Benare's sense of self and her self-worth are tied to her profession as a teacher. She takes pride in her performance at work and in her relationship to her students. Recently fired because of her unwed pregnancy, Benare is trying to explain the unfairness and indignity of her firing to Samant, who barely knows her and knows none of the secret details of her life. Although Benare knows, on one level, that her firing has to do with her pregnancy, she suspects it also comes out of jealousy and resentment, both around her performance and her happy single life.

Benare often emphasizes that "my life is my own." In the

1960s, as a woman in India, this is a particularly radical expression. Women were expected to marry and then remain at home, with a minority entering the workforce and a similar minority choosing to stay unmarried. Benare's life is her own both because of her financial independence and her relationship status, and although her firing will technically rob her of her economic security, she remains unconstrained by the opinions or desires of men. Even as she struggles to envision a future for herself and her child, she knows that at least she has her own life, her own body, and her ability to make decisions.

☝ Oh I've got a sweetheart
Who carries all my books,
He plays in my doll house,
And says he likes my looks.
I'll tell you a secret—
He wants to marry me.
But Mummy says, I'm too little
To have such thoughts as these.

Related Characters: Benare (speaker), Professor Damle, Benare's Uncle, Samant

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Before the others have entered, Benare sings a song as Samant looks on to prove that she is, in fact, feeling well. The song, likely one she sings to or with her students, mirrors Benare's real life struggles. Although neither Samant nor the audience knows this yet, later in the play other characters will reveal that Benare and her uncle had a relationship when she was a teenager. She wanted to get married, but he abandoned Benare and left her devastated. Her mother, unsurprisingly, also disapproved of the relationship and the potential marriage. Although the song seems to be about an innocent childhood romance and a little girl who wants to grow up too fast, it is actually a way for Benare to reveal her past trauma as a young girl coerced into a relationship with a trusted older man. This relationship with her uncle clearly mirrors her current predicament with Professor Damle, the father of her unborn child, who has impregnated her but cannot marry and will not support her.

☝ BENARE. But Samant, 'spreading enlightenment is also one of the Prime Objectives behind our programme'. So our chairman Kashikar will tell you. Kashikar can't take a step without a Prime Objective! Besides him, there's Mrs Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle. I mean Mrs Kashikar. What an excellent housewife the poor woman is! A real Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle type! But what's the use? Mr Prime Objective is tied up with uplifting the masses. And poor Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle has no cradle to rock!

SAMANT. You mean they have no—*[He rocks an imaginary baby in his arms.]*

BENARE. Right. You seem to be very bright, too! Mr Kashikar and the Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle, in order that nothing should happen to either of them in their bare, bare house—and that they shouldn't die of boredom!—gave shelter to a young boy. They educated him. Made him toil away. Made a slave out of him. His name's Balu—Balu Rokde. Who else? . . . Well, we have an Expert on the Law. He's such an authority on the subject, even a desperate client won't go anywhere near him! He just sits alone in the barristers' room at court, swatting flies with legal precedents! And in his tenement, he sits alone killing houseflies! But for today's mock trial, he's a very great barrister. You'll see the wonders he performs! And there's a'Hmm! with us! *[Puts an imaginary pipe in her mouth.]* Hmm! Sci-en-tist! Inter-failed!

SAMANT. Oh, it does sound good fun!

BENARE. And we have an Intellectual too. That means someone who prides himself on his booklearning. But when there's a real-life problem, away he runs! Hides his head. He's not here today. Won't be coming, either. He wouldn't dare!

Related Characters: Samant, Benare (speaker), Professor Damle, Ponshe, Balu Rokde, Mrs. Kashikar, Mr. Kashikar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Before her colleagues arrive, Benare takes a minute to mock them. This game, of insulting others and degrading their relationships and professions, is one all the members of the Living Courtroom play. By belittling one another, each player elevates him or herself. This is linked to insecurity about their middle-class status—well off enough to not have to worry about food or money, the cast of the courtroom is left to fight instead for social capital.

This scene also acts as a brief introduction to the characters the audience will meet in just a few minutes, providing important, if biased, context. Additionally, Benare is not the

only one with this attitude. Her colleagues feel the same way about her: that her attitude is bad, that she feels superior to them, and this contributes to their treatment of her during their mock trial. Benare also subtly calls out Professor Damle, who will later be revealed as the father of her child. Afraid of confronting her and his own guilty conscience, Damle would rather stay home than have to deal with his wrongdoing. Later, when the court tries Benare for her unwed pregnancy, Damle's guilt will not be discussed, and he will be presented as an unfortunate victim of Benare's wild actions, when, clearly, it takes two to make a child.

☞ SAMANT. You're quite right. The great sage Tukaram said... at least I *think* it was him—

BENARE. Forget about the sage Tukaram. I say it—I, Leela Benare, a living woman, 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—

Related Characters: Benare, Samant (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Samant attempts to quote a wise man and sage, Tukaram, who had writings on the female experience. Benare, however, is uninterested in hearing a man's thoughts on womanhood, and especially uninterested in hearing a man's take on her specific experience as a woman. Whereas Tukaram has theories, Benare has over thirty years of memories and lived experience. Women's voices and experiences were often silenced in midcentury India (as in the United States and around the world), and Benare is not interested in having that happened to her.

Benare also takes this moment to remind herself that she is in control of her own life. Afraid for her future, she is unsure of how to proceed and secure a stable life for herself and her child. However, it helps Benare to assert what little agency she still has in order to motivate herself and muster the strength to carry on.

☞ Our feet tread on upon unknown
And dangerous pathways evermore.
Wave after blinded wave is shattered
Stormily upon the shore.
Light glows alive again. Again
It mingles with the dark of night.
Our earthen hands burn out, and then
Again in flames they are alight.
Everything is fully known,
And everything is clear to see.
And the wound that's born to bleed
Bleeds on for ever, faithfully,
There is a battle sometimes, where
Defeat is destined as the end.
Some experiences are meant
To taste, then just to waste and spend . . .

Related Characters: Benare (speaker), Balu Rokde, Professor Damle, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Samant

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Benare recites a poem as she gives a mock lesson to Samant, Sukhatme, and Rokde. Ponshe is present but leaves the room as Benare begins to speak. The poem, Tendulkar notes, is by Shirish Pai, and reading the poem for the first time gave the playwright the idea for the character of Benare.

This poem, and its recitation, is yet another example of Benare using song and poetry to reveal her inner thoughts. Although she is not comfortable sharing her anxiety and distress regarding her unplanned, unwed pregnancy, she feels able to communicate by borrowing another's words. Like the speaker in the poem, she feels as though she is on new ground, forging a new life for herself. She feels as though she is suffering alone in the darkness, unsure of her future.

Still, at some point, Benare finds herself in the light again with clarity and a sense of acceptance, even if she has no guarantee of a happy future. She understands that perhaps she will struggle for the rest of her life because of her unwed pregnancy, and that perhaps the happiness she felt with Professor Damle, the child's father, and before that the happiness she felt as a single woman and teacher, were both temporary. Although depressing, the poem also gives her the strength to carry on even if she fears, or knows, that her future will be a constant uphill battle.

●● MRS KASHIKAR. I say, Benare—[*stroking the garland in her hair*] I did mean to buy a garland for you too—

BENARE [*in Ponshe's tones*]. Hmm! [*Ponshe bites his lips angrily.*]

MRS KASHIKAR [*to Mr Kashikar*]. Didn't I, dear? But what happened was that—

BENARE [*laughing heartily*].—The garland flew away—pouf! Or did the dicky-bird take it? I never want garlands. If I did, couldn't I afford to buy them? I earn my own living, you know. That's why I never feel like buying garlands and things.

Related Characters: Mrs. Kashikar, Benare (speaker), Mr. Kashikar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Kashikar and Mr. Kashikar are late to the Living Courtroom because they stopped so that the husband could buy his wife a garland. When they finally arrive, Mrs. Kashikar tells Benare she meant to buy one but forgot, and Benare brushes her off. Mrs. Kashikar seems only half genuine, more interested in reminding Benare that Benare, unlike Mrs. Kashikar is unmarried and without love.

Benare and Mrs. Kashikar, although the only two women in the play, are total opposites. Mrs. Kashikar has been married for many years, has never worked, and has been unable to conceive a child. She represents a more traditional womanhood. Benare, meanwhile, is a progressive woman: she's younger, employed (at least, she was until recently), and supports herself financially. She's also accidentally pregnant. Benare and Mrs. Kashikar fighting is a microcosm of the new order fighting the old. Mrs. Kashikar is patronizing because she assumes Benare wants what she has—a man who supports her financially and occasionally demonstrates affection. Benare, meanwhile, values her freedom, and rubs it in Mrs. Kashikar's face.

Act Two Quotes

●● SUKHATME. Why are you so grave all of a sudden? After all, it's a game. Just a game, that's all. Why are you so serious?

BENARE [*trying to laugh*]. Who's serious? I'm absolutely—light-hearted. I just got a bit serious to create the right atmosphere. For the court, that's all. Why should I be afraid of a trial like this?

[...]

SUKHATME. Kashikar, you've really picked some charge! A first-class charge! There's no fun in a case. unless there's a really thundering charge!

KASHIKAR. Did you notice, also, Sukhatme, that this charge is important from the social point of view? The question of infanticide is one of great social significance. That's why I deliberately picked it. We consider society's best interests in all we do. Come on, Miss Benare. Rokde, my gavel.

Related Characters: Mr. Kashikar, Benare, Sukhatme (speaker), Balu Rokde, Ponshe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Kashikar is obsessed with the idea of socially significant trials. To him, conducting a trial which deals with moral issues is more important than conducting a trial in which all of his colleagues feel safe and comfortable. Benare, from the start, is obviously uncomfortable being tried with infanticide (even in this playacted scenario), but her feelings, to Kashikar, are secondary to his moral mission.

In Act Three, Kashikar will once again reveal his total disregard for Benare's feelings. He tells Ponshe to speak up as he delivers evidence, as "this is a matter of social importance." Ponshe responds that Benare won't like the secrets he is about to reveal about her private life, and Kashikar counters, "since when has the question of the accused's likes and dislikes been admitted in court?" completely ignoring that this is not a real court and that Benare is not truly a criminal, but a distressed woman and former friend.

Also notable is Kashikar's assertion that infanticide is a charge "of great social significance." Although the killing of a baby is obviously a criminal act, ascribing great social significance to it demonstrates Kashikar's view of society and motherhood. As he and others will discuss later in the play, Kashikar views mothers as societal pillars of morality. For him, women are meant to be mothers, and mothers are

meant to serve society by raising moral children. Therefore, to kill a baby is not simply murder, but also represents a woman's failure to follow through on what he sees as a her primary duty.

☛ KASHIKAR. Silence must be observed while the court is in session. Can't shut up at home, can't shut up here!

MRS KASHIKAR. But I was just telling Samant here—

SUKHATME. Let it pass, Mrs Kashikar. He's just joking.

MRS KASHIKAR. So what? Scolding me at every step!

Related Characters: Mrs. Kashikar, Mr. Kashikar (speaker), Samant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of several examples of the play's title occurring within the play itself. Here, Kashikar, after entertaining a long, off topic discussion among the men of the court, suddenly turns on his wife who has also spoken up. Kashikar has little respect for women, including his wife. Here, although she's only spoken quietly to Samant to explain the workings of the Living Courtroom, Kashikar is quick to chastise and publically embarrass her. Clearly, in his view, women are meant to be seen and not heard. At no point is he receptive to her opinions or even her quiet asides, making it clear it is not what she says that offends him, but the fact that she is speaking at all. Kashikar uses the framework of the court and his performance as a judge to silence his wife, offering a glimpse into their relationship that suggests that even when he does not have a gavel in hand he is uninterested in hearing her speak.

☛☛ SUKHATME. Motherhood is pure. Moreover, there is a great—er—a great nobility in our concept of motherhood. We have acknowledged woman as the mother of mankind. Our culture enjoins us to perpetual worship of her. 'Be thy mother as a god' is what we teach our children from infancy. There is great responsibility devolving upon a mother. She weaves a magic circle with her whole existence in order to protect and preserve her little one—

KASHIKAR. You've forgotten one thing. There's a Sanskrit proverb, *Janani janmabhumischa svargadapi gariyasi*.

'Mother and
The Motherland,
Both are even
Higher than heaven.'

MRS KASHIKAR [*with enthusiasm*]. And of course, 'Great are thy favours, 'O mother' is quite famous.

BENARE. Order, order! This is all straight out of a school composition-book. [*Bites her tongue ironically.*] Prisoner Miss Benare, for abrogating the authority of the court, a reprimand is once more issued to you! [*Pretends to bang a gavel.*]

SUKHATME. I am deeply grateful, Milord, for your addition. In short, 'Woman is a wife for a moment, but a mother for ever.'

Related Characters: Benare, Mrs. Kashikar, Mr. Kashikar, Sukhatme (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Kashikar, Mrs. Kashikar, and Sukhatme all equate womanhood with motherhood, and assign great responsibility to mothers. Mothers, in their view, are the shepherds of society as a whole. Mothers (notably not fathers) are supposed to raise their children to be perfect moral citizens, and mothers themselves are elevated to a divine status. However, although this status should, in theory, entail respect and freedom, instead it places strict expectations and limitations on women. Because mothers have such an important role in society, they should be closely watched and controlled to guarantee they are raising the youth in the proper way.

The implication of motherhood being so important to society is that a mother who fails in her duties is not just responsible for her personal failings, but responsible for the degradation of society as a whole. Within the context of this trial, Kashikar and Sukhatme want to punish Benare not just for the (fictional) murder of her child, but for the perceived breakdown of morality across India.

●● I think he's gone there, inside. I'll do it myself. [At a bound, goes and fetches the dictionary. Placing his hand on it] I, Raghunath Bhikaji Samant, do hereby swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. True enough for the trial, I mean. Of course, what's true for the trial is quite false really. But I'm just taking the oath for practice. [His hand is stall on the dictionary.] You see, I don't want the sin of falsehood. [In apologetic tones] I'm quite religious . . . The oath's over. Now. [Enters the witness-box again.] Go on. [This is to Sukhatme; then, to Mrs Kashikar] You see? I'm not frightened. I just get confused because I'm new to all this. [To Sukhatme] Well, you may go on.

Related Characters: Samant (speaker), Professor Damle, Benare, Karnik, Ponshe, Balu Rokde, Mr. Kashikar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

The Living Courtroom in *Silence! The Court is in Session* blurs together fantasy, reality, truth, and lies. Although many of the other members of the court—Karnik, Rokde, Ponshe, and Mr. Kashikar—do have some insight into Benare's life and realize the ways in which their mock trial is converging with her real life, Samant is a total stranger and as such has no sense of what is true about Benare and what is fictitious.

In this oath, which Samant takes seriously, he demonstrates the strangeness of the trial. The evidence he shares, though “true enough for the trial,” is meant to be just a story; however, Samant's fictional testimony accidentally lands on the actual truth of Benare's affair with Damle and her ensuing pregnancy. Only through performing what he thinks is fiction does Samant reveal the reality of Benare's condition.

Also notable is Samant's fear of sinning by lying. In a play full of those who want to impose their own moral codes on others, no other character seems as concerned with his or her own moral conduct.

●● It's all become quite unexpectedly enjoyable—the whole fabric of society is being soiled these days, Sukhatme. Nothing is undefiled anymore.

Related Characters: Mr. Kashikar (speaker), Ponshe, Professor Damle, Samant, Benare, Sukhatme

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Samant delivered a (completely invented) testimony, in which he recounted an imagined encounter between Benare and Professor Damle. In this scenario, which he pulled from a novel, Benare and Damle had been sexually involved, but when Benare found out she was pregnant Damle cut off their relationship, leaving her to raise her child alone. Although Samant had no knowledge of Benare's real life, he accidentally stumbled upon the truth: Benare had been having an affair with Damle, and she is pregnant with his child. Benare, upset, tries to leave the room, but is locked inside. Her emotional response reveals to her assembled friends and colleagues that their imaginary trial is prosecuting a real “crime.”

Kashikar, the judge, is thrilled to realize they are no longer playing a game. Instead, they are actively investigating Benare's real life indiscretions. Kashikar, like Sukhatme and Ponshe, often reiterate that the objective of the living courtroom is teaching morality to the audience members. Kashikar, an older, conservative man, deeply believes that the past was more moral, and social progress has only lead to increased depravity. Although Benare is ostensibly his friend, Kashikar quickly turns on her. Her unwed pregnancy, in his mind, is a perfect example of what he believes is as societal trend towards degeneracy, and he is happy to make an example out of her.

Act Three Quotes

●● SUKHATME [Looking at Benare as he puts on his gown ceremoniously]. Milord, in consideration of the grave aspect which the case before us has assumed, it is my humble submission that if your lordship were to wear your gown henceforth, it would appear more decorous.

KASHIKAR. Exactly. Rokde, give me my gown.

[He puts on the black gown that Rokde unpacks and hands to him. After that, his gravity and dignity increase.]

SUKHATME. Mr Samant, Mrs Kashikar, Ponshe, Karnik, seat yourselves there exactly as you should. [He straightens up, closes his eyes, and meditates for a while. Then, slapping himself piously on the face, he raises his hands to his forehead in prayer twice or thrice.] My father taught me the habit, Kashikar, of praying to our family god at the beginning of any new enterprise. How pure it makes one feel! The mind takes on new strength.

Related Characters: Mr. Kashikar, Sukhatme (speaker), Balu Rokde, Professor Damle, Samant, Benare

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Act Two, Benare's upset response to Samant's invented testimony, in which Benare and Damle had a baby, revealed to the assembled players and audience that Benare really *is* pregnant, and Damle is her child's father.

At the beginning of Act Three, Sukhatme, acting as the lawyer, and Kashikar, acting as the judge, have decided to continue on with the trial. Now that they know they're prosecuting Benare for a real "crime"—unwed motherhood, not infanticide—they're even more excited about continuing on with the Living Courtroom. As both Sukhatme and Kashikar put on their costumes of robes, they begin to embody the characters they are playing. No longer are they Sukhatme the failed lawyer, and Kashikar the social worker, but agents of the law whose duty it is to enforce justice and morality. The framework of the living courtroom has allowed for Sukhatme and Kashikar to perform the kind of judgmental moral work they've always wanted to do, calling out as guilty those who don't fit their specific, antiquated standards.

☝ All right. She's not less than thirty-four. I'll give it to you in writing! What I say is, our society should revive the old custom of child marriage. Marry off the girls before puberty. All this promiscuity will come to a full stop. If anyone has ruined our society it's Agarkar and Dhondo Keshav Karve. That's my frank opinion, Sukhatme, my frank opinion.

Related Characters: Mr. Kashikar (speaker), Benare, Sukhatme

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Kashikar and Sukhatme once again use the cover of the Living Courtroom to take out their aggression on Benare, whom they have long resented. Both more conservative, traditional men, they are upset by Benare's singleness, and by her life as an independent, working woman. Now, as they ask her for her age, and she refuses to respond, they further insult her by estimating her to be older than she really is. In a society that places greater value

on young, pure women who are still eligible to marry, an older, unmarried woman is undesirable. By suggesting Benare is older than she is, both Kashikar and Sukhatme are attempting to insult her and goad her into speaking back.

Kashikar's aside about child marriage is telling. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social reformers worked to increase the minimum age of marriage. This allowed women, especially, to have time to grow as individuals, to determine their own wants and needs, and to be old enough to fully consent to a binding, adult relationship. Kashikar is clearly unconcerned with the health and safety of teenage girls. Instead, he is afraid of women growing up to be too independent, and in their independence, practicing sexual freedom that he views as a blight on society.

☝ MRS KASHIKAR. What better proof? Just look at the way she behaves. I don't like to say anything since she's one of us. Should there be no limit to how freely a woman can behave with a man? An unmarried woman? No matter how well she knows him? Look how loudly she laughs! How she sings, dances, cracks Jokes! And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out!

SUKHATME [*Disappointed at the 'proof'*]. Mrs Kashikar, at the most one can say all this shows how free she is.

MRS KASHIKAR. Free! Free! She's free alright—in everything! I shouldn't say it. But since it's come up in court, I will. Just hold this a minute.

Related Characters: Sukhatme, Mrs. Kashikar (speaker), Ponshe, Mr. Kashikar, Benare

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Kashikar is called to the stand to deliver evidence against Benare. Sukhatme has asked Mrs. Kashikar to clarify her statements that women these days "get everything without marrying," and to provide examples of how Benare has been behaving promiscuously. When Sukhatme asks Mrs. Kashikar to clarify what "everything" means in this context, Mrs. Kashikar is suggesting that if women can have sex without marrying, they will never get married. Although Mrs. Kashikar has no real proof, she tries to argue that Benare's free behavior in other realms—laughing loudly, drawing attention to herself—means she is also sexually

free.

Clearly, Mrs. Kashikar disapproves of modern, liberated women. She sees Benare as one of these women, and without proof, assumes Benare is sleeping with multiple men, and sees this as a moral failing on Benare's part. Like her husband, Sukhatme, and Ponshe, Mrs. Kashikar enjoys that the trial allows her to voice all her criticisms of Benare and Benare's perceived lifestyle, under the guise both of theatre and justice.

☞ Discipline means discipline.

Related Characters: Mrs. Kashikar (speaker), Benare

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mrs. Kashikar has physically dragged Benare back to the dock, after Benare attempted to stop Ponshe from revealing details of a private conversation. When Mrs. Kashikar tells Benare “discipline means discipline,” she is referring to two things. First, Mrs. Kashikar is telling Benare to behave herself in court (ignoring the fact that it is not a true court, and instead a play put on without Benare's consent). The second meaning of “discipline means discipline” is a reprimand of Benare's behavior outside of the meeting hall. Mrs. Kashikar earlier made it clear she disapproves of Benare's lifestyle as an independent, progressive, unmarried woman, whom Mrs. Kashikar suspects also engages in sexually promiscuous behavior. Mrs. Kashikar is demanding Benare control herself and her urges in all spaces, criticizing her free behavior inside and outside of the Living Courtroom.

☞ KARNIK. For instance, the accused had attempted suicide once before.

SUKHATME [*Radiant*]. That's the point! There is a precedent for the bottle of T1K-20.

KARNIK. I can't say that exactly. I can only tell you what happened. My information is that the accused attempted suicide because of a disappointment in love. She fell in love at the age of fifteen, with her own maternal uncle! That's what ended in disappointment.

MRS KASHIKAR [*Totally floored*]. Her uncle!

SUKHATME. Milord—her maternal uncle—her mother's brother. What an immoral relationship!

KASHIKAR. In other words, just one step away from total depravity. Fine, Sukhatme, very fine!

SUKHATME. Milord, why do you say 'fine'? The present conduct of the accused is totally licentious. We know that. But it now seems that her past, too, is smeared in sin. This shows it as clear as daylight.

Related Characters: Mr. Kashikar, Mrs. Kashikar, Sukhatme, Karnik (speaker), Benare's Uncle, Benare

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange, late in the trial against Benare, reveals how corrupted the court's view of guilt and innocence is, and how uninterested they are in doling out actual justice. Karnik reveals that he has dug into Benare's past and discovered that she had an affair with her uncle as a teenager. This is a relationship that, through a modern lens, is clearly predatory. Benare was significantly younger and her uncle was in a position of authority.

However, Sukhatme and Kashikar, while calling this relationship immoral and depraved, are not referring to the behavior of Benare's uncle, but instead to *Benare's* behavior when she was still legally a child. They call her past conduct “licentious” and “smeared in sin,” not considering the way she was coerced and victimized. Benare was not sexually promiscuous; she was sexually abused by a trusted relative. Sukhatme, Kashikar, and the others don't care about actual justice, which would involve prosecuting a child predator, but instead in advancing their own moral agenda, which blames women for the degradation of society and the bad behavior of men.

●● SUKHATME. Do you know the accused?

KASHIKAR. Only too well! A sinful canker on the body of society— that’s my honest opinion of these grown-up unmarried girls.

Related Characters: Mr. Kashikar, Sukhatme (speaker), Benare

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Although Kashikar has been acting as the judge in this trial, he takes a few minutes to take to the witness stand because he feels he has important evidence. As Sukhatme begins to ask him questions, Kashikar reveals his deeply held biases and his bigotry. Sukhatme asks Kashikar if he knows Benare, and Kashikar responds that she is a “sinful canker.” Not only is this not an answer to Sukhatme’s question, it isn’t even a statement; it’s his opinion, based on his traditional conservative values and the divergence of Benare’s life from his ideal society, in which women are married young and remain deferent to their partners forever. Kashikar clearly resents Benare’s independence and the fact that such independence necessarily gives men less control of women’s lives. Based on this, it is clear that part of Kashikar’s enjoyment of the trial comes from his ability to prosecute and punish those who do not line up with his specific moral code. Through playacting as a judge, he is able to let his true feelings come out.

●● The woman who is an accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood—which is purer than heaven itself. For that, any punishment, however great, that the law may give her, will be too mild by far. The character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality. Not only that. Her conduct has blackened all social and moral values. The accused is public enemy number one. If such socially destructive tendencies are encouraged to flourish, this country and its culture will be totally destroyed [...] Motherhood without marriage has always been considered a very great sin by our religion and our traditions. Moreover, if the accused’s intention of bringing up the offspring of this unlawful maternity is carried to completion, I have a dreadful fear that the very existence of society will be in danger. There will be no such thing as moral values left. Milord, infanticide is a dreadful act. But bringing up the child of an illegal union is certainly more horrifying. If it is encouraged, there will be no such thing as the institution of marriage left. Immorality will flourish. Before our eyes, our beautiful dream of a society governed by tradition will crumble into dust. [...] Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. [...] ‘Woman is not fit for independence.’ . . . That is the rule laid down for us by tradition.

Related Characters: Sukhatme (speaker), Benare

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 114-115

Explanation and Analysis

As Sukhatme delivers his closing argument as lawyer for the prosecution, he makes clear his own biases and uses the framework of the trial as a way to argue against the freedom of women in society. He makes his case for a return to a more conservative—and in his mind, more moral—time when women had less independence.

Sukhatme’s argument begins with accusing Benare of making a “blot on the sacred brow of motherhood,” then continues that because mothers are so important in raising the children of tomorrow, an unmarried mother (who is necessarily an immoral mother) is putting the future of society as a whole at risk. Benare’s crime then is greater, in his eyes, than a single personal indiscretion; it has national, if not worldwide, repercussions.

Sukhatme also tries to spin Benare’s misfortune as willful, her pregnancy a weapon in the war against the institution of marriage and a traditional society. He ignores Benare’s wish to get married before her child is born, instead ignorantly assuming she’s purposefully gotten pregnant when the opposite is true. So hell-bent is Sukatme on shaming Benare for her choices and her misfortunes that he ignores her

actual needs and desires. Instead of helping her find a husband who could support her, he chastises her for her singleness, revealing himself and the court as hypocrites. Sukhatme only wants to use Benare as an example to prove his point: that women are “not fit for independence,” and that women are a danger to society and themselves.

☛ Life is a book that goes ripping into pieces. Life is a poisonous snake that bites itself. Life is a betrayal. Life is a fraud. Life is a drug. Life is drudgery. Life is a something that’s nothing—or a nothing that’s something. [...] Sack it from its job! But why? Why? Was I slack in my work? I just put my whole life into working with the children . . . I loved it! I taught them well! I knew that your own flesh and blood don’t want to understand you. Only one thing in life is all-important—the body! You may deny it, but it is true. Emotion is something people talk about with sentiment. It was obvious to me. I was living through it. It was burning through me. But—do you know?—I did not teach any of this to those tender, young souls. I swallowed that poison, but didn’t even let a drop of it touch them! I taught them beauty. I taught them purity. I cried inside, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair, and I taught them hope. For what sin are they robbing me of my job, my only comfort? My private life is my own business. I’ll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to! That can’t be anyone else’s business; understand?

Related Characters: Benare (speaker), Professor Damle, Benare’s Uncle, Mr. Kashikar

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 116-117

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is excerpted from a longer speech Benare delivers in the play’s climax. Mr. Kashikar gives her just ten seconds to respond to the closing arguments and defend herself. Although Benare remains silent during the actual trial, the action of the play freezes. Benare’s monologue is delivered to the audience, not to the other members of the Living Courtroom; the monologue represents her internal thoughts but has no direct effect on the play’s actions.

Benare explains how difficult her life has been, specifically in the wake of two traumatic romances: her relationship with her uncle, and her relationship with Damle. She then pivots to her work, a logical shift, as teaching and working with children has been one of the few positives, and few constants, throughout her adulthood. Although Benare

opted out of many middle-class traditions like marriage and (planned) pregnancy, she still enjoys being a working woman—for the sake of her independence, and because she genuinely loves teaching her students. Kashikar and Sukhatme have attacked her for (metaphorically) poisoning her students’ morality by acting as a bad example, but Benare counters that she “swallowed that poison” (the trials and tribulations of her adult life) and taught her students only “purity” and compassion. These lines also resonate with the fact that Benare carries *actual* poison in her purse as a last resort, a means to escape her circumstances by ending her life; this reinforces that *she* is the person suffering because of her alleged immorality and faces few options in a society that so has so hypocritically rejected her.

Her argument is convincing, and once again demonstrates how blinded Kashikar and Sukhatme are by their own moralist agendas. Even if one believes Benare is immoral, she’s clearly still skilled at her job and stripping her of her position is stripping children of a competent teacher.

☛ It’s true, I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother’s brother. But in our strict house, in the prime of my unfolding youth, he was the one who came close to me. He praised my bloom every day. He gave me love.... How was I to know that if you felt like breaking yourself into bits and melting into one with someone—if you felt that just being with him gave a whole meaning to life—and if he was your uncle, it was a sin! Why, I was hardly fourteen! I didn’t even know what sin was—I swear by my mother, I didn’t! [...] Again, I fell in love. As a grown woman. I threw all my heart into it; I thought, this will be different. This love is intelligent. It is love for an unusual intellect. It isn’t love at all—it’s worship! But it was the same mistake. I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering—and went his way. He didn’t want my mind, or my devotion—he didn’t care about them! [*Feebly.*] He wasn’t a god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! That’s all! Again, the body! [*Screaming.*] This body is a traitor! [*She is writhing with pain.*] 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. [...] And now it carries within it the witness of that time—a tender little bud—of what will be a lisping, laughing, dancing little life—my son—my whole existence! I want my body now for him—for him alone.

Related Characters: Benare (speaker), Benare’s Uncle, Mr. Kashikar, Ponshe, Sukhatme, Professor Damle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 117-118

Explanation and Analysis

With the play's actions frozen in time, Benare continues to express her inner thoughts to the audience. Benare is able to speak openly about herself for the first time confirming and nuancing facts about her life that have already been reported. She confirms she did have a relationship with her uncle, but what she describes is a predatory relationship. Clearly her older relative had groomed her and manipulated her. This crime, notably, is one Kashikar and Sukhatme are uninterested in prosecuting, as they instead like using this moment when Benare was made a victim as proof of her own active immorality.

Benare then discusses her body. A woman's body is one aspect of her independence. She lives in a patriarchal society where women have little autonomy their bodies, which are often controlled by the agendas of others. Benare has spent the years since her relationship with her uncle fighting for control of her own body, but now, again, feels it has been used against her. She is upset that Damle, a professor and supposedly intellectual man, was uninterested in engaging with her intellectually, and instead interested only in her physical and sexual appeal. Now that she is pregnant, her body is again not quite hers, as it is home to a fetus she has no control over. Still, her pregnancy has given Benare a way to reconnect with her body. She sees it serving a useful, valuable purpose, and so she is able to love it again, as she appreciates the work it is doing in incubating her unborn child.

Prisoner Miss Benare, pay the closest attention. The crimes you have committed are most terrible. There is no forgiveness for them. Your sin must be expiated. Irresponsibility must be chained down. Social customs, after all, are of supreme importance. Marriage is the very foundation of our society's stability. Motherhood must be sacred and pure. This court takes a serious view of your attempt to dynamite all this. It is the firm opinion of this court that your behaviour puts you beyond mercy. And, what is more, the arrogance with which you conducted yourself in society, having done all these things, that arrogance is the most unforgivable thing of all. Criminals and sinners should know their place. You have conducted yourself above your station. The court expresses its indignation at your presumptuousness. Moreover, the future of posterity was entrusted to you. This is a very dreadful thing. The morality which you have shown through your conduct was the morality you were planning to impart to the youth of tomorrow. This court has not an iota of doubt about it. Hence not only today's, but tomorrow's society would have been endangered by your misconduct. It must be said that the school officials have done a work of merit in deciding to remove you from your job. By the grace of God, it has all been stopped in time. Neither you nor anyone else should ever do anything like this again. No memento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed.

Related Characters: Mr. Kashikar (speaker), Benare

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 118-119

Explanation and Analysis

Kashikar delivers his verdict. Although the trial is fake, and although the original crime was supposedly infanticide, the whole trial has clearly shifted since then. Now, Kashikar is charging Benare with a variety of crimes, with the punishment being the death of her unborn child—ironically, a punishment not unlike the crime she was originally (fictitiously) charged with. The shift in the trial reveals the confusing nature of the performance and the way play acting and theatre has blended with reality. That “justice” for Kashikar essentially mimics the initial charge of infanticide suggests that men like him are less concerned with protecting the next generation than they are with keeping women in line; paternalistic legislation is really just a guise for controlling women's bodies.

Kashikar, as is often the case throughout the play, allows his own biases to influence his verdict. He personally believes that marriage is the foundation of society; he personally

believes Benare is a “criminal and a sinner”; he personally finds issues with those he finds uppity or as though they are better than the station he personally believes they should occupy. In delivering this speech Kashikar seeks to punish Benare for the crime of being too independent and having too much self-worth, when he believes unmarried women past a certain age are necessarily sinful and worthless.

Kashikar also assumes that Benare is immoral and that therefore she will pass that immorality on to her students, polluting society from inside of the classroom. This is based on a series of unfair assumptions— that extramarital sex is inherently sinful, and that such sinner will necessarily pollute the morality of others. Kashikar is uninterested in investigating his own logic, but very interested in using the framework of the court to embarrass and harass his colleague, whose life and decisions he disapproves of, doling out a kind of vengeful justice that puts the blame on Benare for a pregnancy that took two to come into being.

●● 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 . . .
 Act Three

Related Characters: Benare (speaker), Samant

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

After the conclusion of the trial the other actors exit the stage. Benare, emotionally devastated, remains in the center, catatonic. Over the sound system in the theatre this poem begins to play, spoken in Benare’s voice (although the actress herself remains silent). Benare delivered the first half of this poem earlier in the play to Samant, and now recites it in full. At the start of the play this song provided an insight into Benare’s life and situation, and now it provides a kind of mirror to her predicament.

The poem seems to be a veiled reference to Benare’s own life. In this metaphor she is the sparrow. Her nest—that is, her job her independence, and her security—has been stolen from her. Or, considering Mr. Kashikar’s verdict that she must have an abortion, this could be seen as her nest egg, her unborn child, being stolen from her. Continuing with this metaphor, the parrot, who seems genuinely concerned for the sparrow’s wellbeing, is like Samant, the only character who shows any compassion for Benare and who shows little judgment of her circumstances. The rest of the cast, meanwhile, are like the crows in the song. They wonder, “what are your troubles to do with me?”—completely absolving themselves of responsibility in helping a friend and a colleague. Instead, at best, they refuse to help; at worst, they actively persecute her for her perceived immorality.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT ONE

Samant and Benare unlock and enter an empty meeting hall. Samant carries a lock and key, a toy parrot, and a book. Samant notices Benare is sucking on her finger, and wonders if she caught it in the door's bolt. He warns her that the door is finicky, and it is easy to accidentally lock oneself inside the room. Benare explains her finger is fine, and, in fact, she's feeling "wonderful" for the first time in days.

Samant's question about the door foreshadows its eventual malfunctioning, which will trap the cast in the hall. Benare currently has many secrets, most of which pertain to the ways her life is falling apart. She is looking for a husband and feels "wonderful" now that she's alone with a new eligible bachelor.



Samant had picked up Benare and the rest of her troop from the train station, but Benare had rushed ahead with him. She tells Samant she liked leaving everyone behind, while she imagined going "somewhere far, far away" with Samant. He is confused. Benare tells Samant she thinks he is a "very pure and good person." She asks about his wife, but he explains although he makes a decent living, he has never married.

Unbeknownst to Samant, Benare is on the hunt for a husband. Her personal life is in shambles, and she needs to support of a friend or a lover. Benare's questions and comments are all her attempts to discover Samant's relationship status and then compliment him in hopes he'll like her.



Samant moves the conversation to a magic show he saw in the meeting hall. As Samant talks about it Benare moves close to him and asks him about the performance. Embarrassed, Samant backs away, Benare moves closer again, but when Samant merely continues to talk, displaying "complete innocence," Benare backs away and begins to complain that her colleagues haven't arrived yet.

Benare attempts to subtly communicate her romantic interest to Samant. When he fails to pick up on her signals she immediately turns away and, although she had been happy to be alone with him, now she is frustrated that her colleagues are late.



Samant still wants to talk about the magician, but Benare has moved on. She is a schoolteacher, and—in reference to her delayed colleagues—insists that she's never been late to school or fallen behind in her lessons. She notes that professionally there is "not a bit of room for disapproval."

Benare takes great pride in her work. A schoolteacher, she attempts to use her professional successes to bolster her status outside of the classroom.



Samant asks if Benare is a schoolmarm but she corrects him, preferring to call herself a teacher. She tells Samant how she loves the children she teaches, and how they don't "scratch you till you bleed, then run away like cowards." Suddenly, she becomes warm and asks Samant to open the window.

Benare dislikes the term schoolmarm because it suggests an older, conservative woman. When she alludes to people scratching her, she is referring to her colleagues, both at work (as she has been fired and harassed her for perceived immoral behavior) and in the Living Courtroom.



Benare's mood brightens again and she begins to wander around the room. Samant suggests she sit down, but Benare explains that when she's teaching she never sits down. She continues, explaining she'd "give the last drop of [her] blood" to teach her class, but that this has made her fellow teachers and supervisors jealous. Benare continues, frantically, that there is an enquiry into her because of "one bit of slander," but that she hasn't hurt anyone. If anything she's only ruined her own life, which is hers to ruin.

Benare places her hand on her stomach as she delivers her monologue. As she trails off, Samant stands awkward and embarrassed. He offers to go find the rest of the troop but Benare asks him to stay, as she doesn't like being alone.

Samant asks Benare if she is feeling well. She says she is, and sings a song to prove it, about a sweetheart who "wants to marry me / But Mummy says, I'm too little / To have such thoughts as these."

Benare wonders if Samant understands the event happening that evening. He knows it has "something to do with the court," and Samant clarifies it's a living courtroom, whose goal is "spreading enlightenment." Benare begins to joke about the fellow members of her troop—calling Ms. Kashikar "Mrs. Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle" although she has no child, insulting Rokde, whom she says the Kashikars have turned into a slave, and mocking Sukhatme's unpopular law practice and Punkshe's academic failings. Finally, Benare notes there's an "intellectual," who refuses to face real problems, but who will not be attending today.

Benare hears Sukhatme, Punkshe, and Rokde arrive outside, and suggests to Samant that the two of them hide and surprise the others. Benare and Samant hide behind a door as the others arrive carrying suitcases, a microphone, and other costumes and equipment. They jump out in surprise, but only Benare finds it funny. Sukhatme jokes that Benare is a child at heart and doesn't want to grow up. Benare insists that as a teacher she is very serious, but that everyone should take be joyful when they can. She then pivots, adding that no should have "false modesty or dignity" or care about others, and wonders if when someone's life is over if anyone will "give you a bit of theirs?"

Benare continues to demonstrate how invested she is in her work, and how important her work is to her well-being. As a middle-class woman who earns her own income, her work is a huge part of her identity and her distress at potentially being fired is understandable; this would rob her of her economic security. Her passion at work makes it unlikely that her persecution is justified.



By placing her hand on her stomach as she speaks, Benare accidentally suggests one of her secrets—her pregnancy out of wedlock.



Through song, Benare reveals more of her secrets. This song suggests her own secret affairs, in the present with married Professor Damle and in the past with her uncle.



Benare is one of several characters who mocks her colleague's professions. Among a group of people who all occupy a similar space in society, degrading one another's jobs is an easy way to assert social dominance. Benare's jab at the intellectual is an insult directed at Professor Damle, who will later be revealed as the father of her child, who was uninterested in helping her raise it.



Benare continues to hint at her secret troubles—her firing and her pregnancy. She continues to double down on her claim that she was a good teacher, as such a position gives her social capital. When Benare references false modesty, dignity, and a lack of empathy, she is referencing her friends and colleagues who know or suspect her condition yet refuse to help.



Samant begins to quote Tukaram, a great sage, but Benare cuts him off, explaining that she, “a living woman,” is speaking from her “own experience.” She insists that life must belong to the individual who is living it, and that “every moment” is “precious.”

Ponkshe returns and Sukhatme jokes that although Ponkshe has failed his science exam twice, and works as a clerk, not a scientist, he looks good in the witness box. Rokde laughs, and Ponkshe turns on him, arguing that at least he, Ponkshe, didn't rely on the charity of the Kashikars, instead using his own father's money.

Benare reinserts herself, telling the men that, surprisingly, she was quiet and reserved as a child. She describes putting fresh covers on her schoolbooks and inscribing the first page with a poem that ended “this book is mine / Till I am dead!” The books were torn and lost over time, but Benare asserts that she is not dead.

Rokde likes Benare's poem and tries to commit it to memory. Excited by an opportunity to play the role of teacher, Benare offers to tell the men a story and has them sit like children. Annoyed, Ponkshe leaves the room. Benare begins a poem, about “a battle ... where / Defeat is destined at the end...” but then changes her mind midway through and begins a song.

Karnik, an experimental theatre actor, enters. Sukhatme stands and asks Karnik if he thinks the room is suitable for their trial. Karnik thinks it is. Benare exclaims, “our mock court tonight should go over well! Just like a real one.” The last members of the troop, Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar, have yet to arrive because Mrs. Kashikar wanted her husband to buy her a floral garland. Benare comments how “full of life” the couple must be, buying gifts for each other. Karnik, however, argues that when he sees a husband and wife acting lovingly in public he assumes they're concealing something in private, and insists he suppresses the urge to buy garlands for his wife.

Benare says if she were Karnik she'd buy his wife daily garlands. Sukhatme enters the conversation, and tells Benare that she could buy gifts for her husband, wondering, “what that most fortunate man will be like?”

Benare is frequently frustrated by men who claim to understand her experience as a woman better than she herself does.



The members of the Living Courtroom enjoy knocking each other down by insulting each others' professional accomplishments. Each member has failures to mock, and so no one is safe. Notably, instead of attacking Sukhatme, who is of the same class, Ponkshe punches down, insulting Rokde.



Here, Benare's schoolbooks seem to stand in for her body and her psyche. Over time, as she's aged and endured various traumas, the book of her life has been torn and damaged; however, she remains alive and resilient.



The poem Benare recites is a poem by the author Shirish Pai, which Tendulkar had read and which, in fact, inspired him to create the character of Benare. Through poetry, Benare can say what she really thinks—how she feels her life is a constant uphill battle, but she plans to forge ahead anyway.



Benare's comment about the realistic appearance of the court foreshadows how the day will devolve into an actual persecution of her own supposed immorality. Karnik assumes that demonstrating affection in public is always an overcompensation for private troubles. Suggesting the Kashikars' marriage is troubled is yet another way to take down a member of the theatre troop, as stable marriages, like successful careers, help elevate an individual's social status.



Benares's colleagues know she is unmarried, and although this was increasingly common in India at the time, more conservative people would see Benare's singleness as a personal failure.



Benare changes the conversation and asks Samant (whose name she has forgotten) to start setting up chairs. Samant, who has set up some of the chairs, addresses Ponshe as sahib and tells him to sit. Ponshe is flattered but declines. Ponshe asks Samant if there is tea in the meeting hall and is upset that there is no available sugar.

The speed with which Benare has forgotten Samant's name demonstrates how he was only important to her as a potential husband. Ponshe is flattered by honorifics, and likely especially flattered that he is the only one Samant has addressed in such a way. This underscores the characters' concern with social status.



Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar finally enter. Kashikar double checks that Rokde has brought all the baggage because in the past Rokde has forgotten important items. Kashikar goes through several items with Rokde who looks "increasingly miserable and irritated."

By insisting that Rokde is bad at his job, or else highlighting past failures, the Kashikars keep Rokde down socially and emotionally, allowing them to better control him.



Mrs. Kashikar tells Benare she meant to buy a garland for her, too, but Benare brushes her off. Benare insists she never wants garlands and earns her own living, anyway, and chooses not to spend it on garlands.

Mrs. Kashikar subtly insults Benare by bringing up the garlands, reminding Benare that she, Mrs. Kashikar, has found a husband, while Benare remains alone.



Karnik, Kashikar, and Sukhatme consider the organization of the courtroom. Karnik points out where "President Johnson" will stand and Samant is amazed and confused. Rokde explains Karnik will play him, and the real Lyndon B. Johnson will not be joining them.

The Living Courtroom often performs a real trial based on a Lyndon B. Johnson court case. Samant, less worldly and educated than his peers, doesn't understand that Johnson will not actually attend.



Rokde, suddenly remembering, goes to Mrs. Kashikar and informs her Professor Damle hasn't arrived. Benare becomes silent, then goes to talk to Ponshe who refuses to engage with her. As Rokde worries that Damle will miss the performance, Ponshe finally begins speaking, asking Benare what had happened to her friend, who was in trouble and whom she had tried to set up with Ponshe.

It will later be revealed that Benare approached Ponshe asking him to marry a "friend" of hers who was pregnant and in distress. This friend was, in reality, Benare, which Ponshe understood. By bringing up her struggle he doesn't want to help her, but instead shame her and remind her of the power he has over her.



Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar, Sukhatme, and Karnik discuss Damle. Kashikar is worried but Sukhatme insists he'll be able to figure out a way to go forward with the trial even if the counsel for the accused—Damle's role—remains unfilled. Sukhatme says he can be both prosecuting and defense attorneys.

Damle has not arrived, likely because, as the audience will discover later, he impregnated Benare and does not want to be confronted. He probably feels guilty or hopes to avoid scandal and protect his reputation.



Rawte, another member of the troop, who plays the fourth witness, has the flu and must be replaced. Rokde begs to play the role but Karnik and Kashikar shoot him down, forcing him to stick to his current minor role as usher. Sukhatme suggests Samant, who has no acting experience. Mrs. Kashikar asks what Benare thinks of Samant, and she responds that she thinks he's "lovely," clarifying that she is only referring to his fitness as a witness.

Although Rokde has been with the troop for some period of time and desperately wants a bigger role in the production, the members of the cast are committed to denying him what he wants. By exerting this control and keeping him in a less important role, they also suppress him socially and assert their own social dominance through the production itself.



Sukhatme asks Samant his name, and promises that, although the local has never even seen a court or even a mock trial, Sukhatme will have him “word-perfect before the show.” Kashikar suggests rehearsing, and Benare agrees, as she’s forgotten a book to occupy her. Kashikar jokes she must be reading “True Stories,” like his wife, but insists he is too busy with work to “do more than look at the pictures.” Mrs. Kashikar objects, but Kashikar silences her.

Benare complains that the troop has performed their planned trial, about atomic weapons, seven times already. Sukhatme suggests creating a new, imaginary case to pass time and teach Samant about the court. Karnik says this is called “a Visual Enactment,” but Sukhatme doesn’t understand giving a complicated name to a simple thing, insisting “this is just a game.”

Ponkshe and Mrs. Kashikar send Samant to get cigarettes and pan. Benare leaves to room to wash her face and freshen up. While she’s gone Karnik, Sukhatme, Ponkshe, and Kashikar decide to keep the same cast as before but find a new accused. Karnik reveals he has heard some gossip about Benare from Rokde. Ponkshe says he has some news about her, too. Finally, Sukhatme suggests Benare as prisoner. Everyone agrees. Mrs. Kashikar thinks it will be interesting and different to have a woman on trail.

Kashikar agrees that a new accused would add variety, and Mrs. Kashikar supports him, but Kashikar immediately chastises her for speaking up. Sukhatme suggests Rokde, but although Rokde is enthusiastic Ponkshe shoots him down. Kashikar wants to be the accused but cannot also be the judge. Kashikar also dismisses Mrs. Kashikar when she volunteers, criticizing her for always “wanting to show off!”

Kashikar wants Benare to be charged with something of “social significance.” The men huddle, and Ponkshe gives suggestion the audience is unable to hear. The group breaks up and arranges the furniture to look more like a court. Ponkshe then instructs the others to go into the wings, while he and Kashikar stand out of sight.

Benare returns newly clean, singing about a parrot and its friend, a **sparrow**, who has been crying because “someone has stolen my nest away.”

The glimpses the audience gets into Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar’s marriage are bleak. Although both are relatively conservative, subscribing to the idea that women belong in the home and men outside of it, Mr. Kashikar cruelly asserts his dominance over his wife at every possible opportunity.



Throughout the events of the play, even as Benare becomes more emotionally affected, everyone else will insist it is “just a game.”



Ponkshe and Karnik will later reveal that they have privileged information about Benare’s pregnancy and employment prospects. Although ostensibly her friends, they clearly disapprove of her lifestyle and want to use the framework of the court to shame and make an example of her.



Once again, Kashikar unfairly puts down his wife. Although she is acting unremarkably, vying to be the accused just like everyone else, Kashikar seems to resent his wife seeking attention not just because he dislikes that behavior, but because he always wants to be the center of attention himself.



The point of the Living Courtroom has always been to bring cases of “social significance” to public attention. However, an outsized concern with public education leads to a total lack of concern for Benare, who will be on trial.



This song, which Benare sings again at the end of the play, reveals her inner troubles. The song represents her own journey as someone who has lost all security and hope and fears losing her child.



Ponkshe ambushes Benare and announces that she has been “arrested on suspicion of a crime of extremely grave nature,” Benare stiffens. Kashikar moves to sit in the judge’s chair as the players in the wings arrive and assemble the wooden bars of a dock around Benare. Sukhatme enters in his lawyer’s robes. Samant has returned but only watches. Kashikar announces that they are accusing Benare of infanticide.

Although Benare has not aborted a fetus or killed an infant, she is concealing a pregnancy; as such, the charge of infanticide hits close to home. As the play progresses, the other members of the Living Courtroom will increasingly use the mock trial as a cover to impose their own very real moral expectations onto Benare.



ACT TWO

Act Two begins exactly where Act One left off. Kashikar repeats the last line of the previous act, asking Benare if she is guilty of infanticide. Benare, still in shock from the accusation, doesn’t answer.

The accusation is too close to Benare’s real life for her to treat it as “just a game.” At least some of her colleagues know this, making the trial especially cruel.



Samant has arrived with pan and cigarettes. He hands them out. Sukhatme tries to offer some to Benare but she declines, flustered. Sukhatme wonders why she’s so “grave,” since it is “just a game.” Benare forces herself to laugh and says she was just trying to “create the right atmosphere” for the court.

Throughout the trial the men, especially, will insist it is just a game and that Benare’s seriousness is unwarranted. This displays a lack of empathy as well as a lack of interest in the wellbeing of an individual woman—ostensibly their friend—as they focus on their own pleasure and on the greater implications of the trial.



Hearing Benare laugh, Samant wonders if he’s missed a joke and Karnik explains Benare has been charged with infanticide. Samant doesn’t know the word and Karnik explains. Samant is shocked by the gravity of the charge, but Sukhatme argues “there’s no fun in a case unless there’s a really thundering charge.” Kashikar adds that it’s a cause of “social significance,” as the troop has “society’s best interests in all we do.”

Sukhatme and Kashikar repeatedly assert that the point of their trials is to bring to public attention causes “of social significance.” However, they overlook the best interests of the members of their troop, notably Benare, in their rush to perform for “society’s best interests.”



Kashikar has Rokde bring him his gavel, to make sure Rokde hasn’t forgotten to pack it. Although Kashikar didn’t need the gavel for this practice trial, he now decides to use it. Sukhatme proposes that the court take a 15 second break to spit out the pan. The men discuss the amount of time needed, criticizing Benare when she interjects. They talk for over a minute and a half.

Ironically, although Kashikar and others criticize Benare for interrupting the trial, they are happy to interrupt it for their own inane conversations, demonstrating a double standard regarding who they think is worthy of time and attention. The framework of the trial allows their biases to come to light.



Mrs. Kashikar makes an aside to Samant that the argument about pan is “just in fun,” and a demonstration of how in court you need permission for everything. Kashikar hears her and bangs his gavel, complaining that she “can’t shut up at home, can’t shut up here.” Mrs. Kashikar protests, but Sukhatme cuts her off, arguing Kashikar was “just joking.”

Mr. Kashikar uses the court to enforce his biases regarding the behavior of men and women. He doesn’t want his wife to speak at all (each time she talks he criticizes her for talking too much or inappropriately), and as judge is able to make his desires into law.



Benare tries to address Rokde, calling him by his first name, Balu, which angers him. Kashikar calls for order arguing that for Samant's sake "the dignity of the court must be preserved." Benare asks if she can be accused of something else and mocks Kashikar when he denies her request. Kashikar reprimands her for "obstructing the due process of law." Karnik urges her to be serious so Samant can better understand the court. Sukhatme adds they need to be serious "otherwise, this game becomes really childish."

Benare pleads not guilty, arguing she couldn't even kill a cockroach. Rokde sets up a book for oath-taking and a witness-box. Sukhatme, stretched out lazily while smoking, delivers the prosecution's speech. He begins, "motherhood is a sacred thing," a "pure" thing that gives much responsibility to a woman. Benare interrupts wondering how he knows anything about motherhood, but Kashikar reprimands her and Sukhatme continues.

Kashikar adds a Sanskrit proverb, that mothers are "higher than heaven." Mrs. Kashikar also gives an additional quote, but Sukhatme only acknowledges Kashikar's addition, and then adds himself that "woman is a wife for a moment but a mother for ever." Samant applauds, overwhelmed by the sequence, and Mrs. Kashikar reminds him not to applaud that evening.

Sukhatme argues that, given the status of motherhood, infanticide is the most "devilish thing on earth," and he aims to prove Benare is guilty. He calls Ponkshe as his first witness, announcing him as a "world-famous scientist." Ponkshe swears upon the Oxford English Dictionary, because Rokde has forgotten the Bhagavad-Geeta.

Sukhatme grills Ponkshe on his relationship to Benare. Ponkshe describes her as a "schoolmarm" which Benare protests as she is "still quite young!" When she interrupts again Kashikar reminds her of the "value of self-control," before leaving to go to the bathroom while Sukhatme continues.

Sukhatme asks Ponkshe if Benare's conduct is "like that of a normal unmarried woman?" Benare objects that Ponkshe has no way of knowing a normal unmarried woman's conduct, but Ponkshe ignores her and says her behavior is different because she "runs after men too much." Sukhatme then asks Ponkshe if Benare has a "particularly close relationship" with any man, and Benare interrupts that she has a close relationship with every man in the room, excepting Samant. Ponkshe complains no one is serious and wonders if there is any point in continuing the trial.

When Benare is upset by the court, she is accused of taking it too seriously; however, when she disrupts the proceedings, she is accused of turning it into a childish game. While the men are allowed to treat the proceedings however they want, the trial allows them to reveal their sexist biases and their belief that men inherently have a right to speak and express opinions, whereas women do not.



The court allows Sukhatme and Kashikar an opportunity to espouse their regressive ideas about motherhood. Benare, a woman (and a secret mother-to-be) is not allowed to share her opinions or criticize the men's although she logically would know better. Once again, a woman's opinions are shut down and motherhood is turned from a respected social institution into a prison that forces women to behave in a certain way for the sake of their children.



The idea of mothers as "higher than heaven" and responsible for the moral wellbeing of society is not progressive or empowering. In fact, it restricts the lives of mothers, who are now expected to sacrifice their autonomy and any alleged moral ambiguity for their children.



Sukhatme's assertion that infanticide is the worst possible crime is an opinion, not a fact, which reveals his own biases. The men of the court wanted to punish Benare for her other perceived indiscretions, like being an independent woman and having sex before marriage.



As when Samant called her a schoolmarm earlier, Benare reacts strongly. She dislikes the associations, which devalue her both as a teacher and as a woman.



The trial continues to offer Benare's colleagues an opportunity to grant opinions of her behavior. Of course, the crime of running after men is subjective, criminal only if one believes women should not have agency over themselves or their sexuality; nevertheless, in the context of this court it is framed as immoral and punishable. Additionally, this claim is unconfirmed, based only on a general sense that Benare is too free in her behavior.



Kashikar returns, and although Benare jokes about leaving herself, and Karnik seems fed up, Kashikar insists they continue. Sukhatme resumes his questioning. Ponshe says sometimes Benare's actions make no sense, beginning a story about when she tried to arrange a marriage for him. He doesn't finish his story, distracted by Benare sticking out her tongue, and Sukhatme swaps him as a witness for Karnik "the great actor."

Karnik explains he knows Benare through their theatre troop. Sukhatme wonders what descriptions of mothers are like in the plays Karnik performs. Karnik says there aren't mothers in his plays, but if there were, he'd define a mother as "one who gives birth." Sukhatme wonders if a mother is someone who protects her child, or one who strangles it, but Karnik argues both are mothers as both have given birth.

Sukhatme notes Karnik is in "form today." Kashikar agrees but asks Karnik to give straight answers and save his performance for the evening. Sukhatme asks Karnik's opinion of Benare's conduct. Karnik clarifies "in this mock trial, or in real life." Sukhatme says in real life, but Kashikar insists the questions refer to the trial. Karnik says he knows nothing.

Karnik then reveals that although he has not seen Benare in a "compromising situation," Rokde has. Sukhatme calls Rokde to the witness box. Rokde is resistant, but Mrs. Kashikar promises that if he can give good evidence now he might get another chance at a larger role, whereas if he messes up, he'll never get a chance again. Kashikar remains silent but gives his wife a chastising look.

Sukhatme tries to question Rokde, who remains speechless. Benare provokes him, calling him Balu and laughing, until finally he snaps. He tells how he went to Professor Damle's house one evening and saw Benare there. Benare stiffens. Samant asks if this is true, or just for the trial, but no one answers him. Kashikar tells Sukhatme he thinks this is getting too personal but does not stop the lawyer. Benare agrees, but Sukhatme argues, "it's just for the trial."

Benare gets agitated, arguing that her private life is off limits. Sukhatme insists she calm down, and not spoil the mood, as this "game's great fun."

Ponshe knows that Benare's actions do make sense—he suspects she is pregnant and tried to ask him to marry her under the guise of looking for a husband for her friend. Instead of helping her in any way, he seems to plan to use the knowledge to humiliate her in this fake trial, an action that is neither moral nor necessary.



Karnik, unlike the others, is more interested in playing games and being combative than shaming Benare for her behavior. He has no quotes about motherhood, instead preferring to verbally spar about the definition of a mother. For him, performing is actually just a game.



This is one of the first instances of Benare's real life explicitly blurring into the performance of the trial. By clarifying which type of conduct he should remark upon, Karnik opens the possibility of Benare's real life being brought in as evidence for this fictional charge.



Rokde struggles to decide whether or not to testify. On the one hand, he craves attention and validation, but on the other part of his testimony (which Karnik knows, having overheard a conversation between Benare and Rokde) involves Benare slapping him, which would make him seem subservient and lower his social status more.



Real life and the trial continue to blur together. Though the evidence Karnik wanted Rokde to give was that of a conversation he overheard, this turns out to be almost more titillating. Unconcerned with protecting Benare's personal life, the court is now obsessed with the scandal of it all.



Although clearly no longer a game, Sukhatme and others don't care about Benare's opinion or wellbeing, only her humiliation and the entertainment she can provide.



Requiring prompting, Rokde explains he saw Benare in Damle's room. He thought something was amiss because Damle normally invited him in but didn't that night. Rokde also accuses Benare of looking downfallen when she saw he had arrived at Damle's house. Sukhatme submits the evidence to Kashikar and adds that Benare's "behavior is certainly suspicious." She protests, joking she'll submit the names of twenty-five other people she's been alone with. Sukhatme submits this as further evidence.

Benare adds she and Samant were recently alone together, but Samant clarifies that she behaved "in a most exemplary manner." Kashikar wonders how Benare's conduct with other men this is relevant, but Karnik and Ponkshe insist Sukhatme continue on arguing it is "just a rehearsal," and only a game.

Sukhatme calls Samant to the witness box. Samant is confused but game, and takes the oath "for practice," promising to tell the truth. However, Samant is religious and doesn't want to accidentally sin, so he clarifies that he is technically lying for the sake of the trial.

Sukhatme begins to question Samant. Samant thinks Benare is a "very nice lady," although Sukhatme argues that his opinion is not "reliable in court." Benare pretends to sleep, and the court is sidetracked with discussions of sleeping and how to fall asleep more easily. With effort, Samant gets the group back on track.

Sukhatme invents a scenario in which, after Rokde saw Benare with Damle, Samant arrived at Damle's home. Samant pushes back that he wasn't there and had never met Damle. Karnik points out that "the crime itself is imaginary," and Ponkshe adds, "only the accused is real." Samant finally understands the game he is meant to play and begins to fabricate evidence.

Samant recounts arriving at Damle's room and finding the door locked. He knocked and Damle answered. Samant could hear a woman crying from another room. He suspects, based on the soft secretive sounding crying, she wasn't a member of Damle's family. Samant heard the woman ask Damle, "if you abandon me in this condition, where shall I go?" Samant reports Damle answered that he couldn't help and had to consider his own reputation. The courtroom is captivated.

Although what Rokde saw was in fact suspicious—unbeknownst to the cast and the audience, Benare was at Damle's to discuss her unplanned pregnancy—being alone with a man is not a crime. Benare's pushback is fair, given that as an unmarried woman with obligations only to herself she often has the opportunity to be alone with men and women, which doesn't necessarily imply sexual or immoral relationships.



As they often do when called out, the men insist they are only playing a game and that no one should take the trial too seriously. However, they do not use the framework of this being a game to modify their own behavior to be less aggressive or accusatory.



Samant is the only character to be careful to clarify when he is telling the truth and when he is employing fiction. He is concerned with morality and sin, which the other characters claim to be, although they are not pious in their actions.



Although the opinions of others have been counted as evidence, because Samant's opinion is favorable, it is inadmissible. Once again, the double standards of the trial and its true purpose—punishing Benare—are starkly revealed.



The line "only the accused is real" is telling. It demonstrates that the assembled courtroom is committed to persecuting Benare, a real woman who they believe should be punished for her behavior, for an invented crime in a fictional trial—a trial that nevertheless will provide them with the opportunity to persecute someone they disapprove of.



Although Damle is never held accountable for his actions, and only Benare is punished and ridiculed for her pregnancy, Damle is just as responsible. Although held up as somehow more moral, he is less so—more concerned with his own reputation and status than he is with a friend and lover in distress.



Samant continues, reporting Benare called Damle “heartless,” and Damle responded, “nature is heartless.” Benare had told him that if he left her she would have no choice but to kill herself, and Damle would be responsible for two deaths. In the courtroom, Benare cuts Samant off, accusing him of lying. Ponshe responds, “of course [he] is. So?”

Samant agrees that he is lying. He explains he’s pulling his story from a novel. Benare threatens to leave or break the set if the play continues, and Mrs. Kashikar asks why she’s responded to violently if she’s innocent. Benare explains she hates being ganged up on.

Benare becomes more frantic and begins to cry. She runs to the wings. Samant sympathetically wonders what happened, while the rest of the cast becomes suddenly excited. Kashikar comments to Sukhatme that “the whole fabric of society is being soiled these days,” and Sukhatme observes that, although Samant was reciting from a book, he’s stumbled on some truth—that Benare and Professor Damle were romantically or sexually involved. Benare reenters. She collects up her bag and purse and attempts to unbolt the door to the outside. It is stuck. She bangs on it to no avail. Samant goes to help her and realizes that the door is locked and can only be opened from the outside. Kashikar and Sukhatme decide the trial should continue.

ACT THREE

Act Three resumes where Act Two let off. Sukhatme and Kashikar, speaking more formally than in the previous acts, usher Benare to the witness box. She will not move. They order Rokde to help, he refuses, and so Mrs. Kashikar pulls Benare to the box where she stands in silent terror.

Sukhatme puts on his lawyer gown and urges Kashikar to put on his judge’s robes. As they dress their “gravity and dignity increase.”

Sukhatme orders the assembled men and women to sit. He closes his eyes and prays, noting how “pure” it makes him feel, and how much strength it gives to him. Finished, he insists Benare take an oath. She remains still and silent. Samant urges her to cooperate, as it is “all a game.”

Although Samant is giving a fictitious testimony, he’s accidentally stumbled upon the truth, revealing through fiction an actual interaction between Benare and Damle.



Truth and fiction continue to blur. Benare is clearly upset by the story, and although she could reasonably be upset by the accusations, whether or not they’re true, her prosecutors are looking for any evidence that they’ve stuck a nerve.



Finally, the truth comes out through Samant’s invented story, which he pulled from a novel. Instead of expressing any remorse for dredging up uncomfortable memories, the assembled courtroom is excited to have struck a nerve. They are more interested in prosecuting a woman they see as soiling the fabric of society than in demonstrating actual moral fortitude and helping their friend.



This scene cements the gathered thespians complete disregard for Benare’s wellbeing. Although she obviously no longer wants to take part in the “game,” their own quest for their twisted version of justice outweighs treating her morally.



By donning their costumes, the two men become even more committed to their roles. They feel more authoritative and therefore command more respect.



Even as the mood in the court has shifted, and Benare has been trapped inside, Samant still calls the whole thing a game, although it clearly is not. Sukhatme’s reference to purity reflects his discussion of the importance of mothers’ morality earlier in the play, and also suggests that he is pure while others, like Benare, are not.



Mrs. Kashikar places Benare's hand on the dictionary, and though she still will not speak Mrs. Kashikar argues they should continue. Sukhatme begins to question her although she remains silent. Sukhatme asks her age, and Mrs. Kashikar guesses thirty-two, but Kashikar won't accept this estimation. When Benare refuses to answer yet again, Kashikar decides she's "not less than thirty-four."

Kashikar gives a short speech about reviving child marriage in order to curb promiscuity. He argues that Agarkar and Dhondo Keshav Karve, two social reformers and women's welfare activists, have ruined society.

Sukhatme asks Benare how she has managed to remain unmarried at such a "mature" "advanced" age. She remains silent even as Kashikar yells at her. Sukhatme decides to call a new witness.

Mrs. Kashikar is called to the stand. Kashikar mocks her for being over eager. Sukhatme asks Mrs. Kashikar why, she thinks, Benare has remained unmarried. Mrs. Kashikar believes it must have been a choice, and Benare could have married if she wanted. She thinks it's an issue of women earning their own incomes, which leads to promiscuity, which leads to delayed marriage. Mrs. Kashikar observes women can get "everything" they want without being tied down. Sukhatme asks her to elaborate. She clarifies that she means these women can get "everything in life."

Sukhatme asks Mrs. Kashikar for proof that Benare has behaved promiscuously. Mrs. Kashikar points to the free way Benare acts around men. She complains about the volume of Benare's laugh, her singing, and her dancing. Sukhatme is disappointed with this proof.

Mrs. Kashikar tries another strategy, wondering why Benare needed Damle to walk her home after performances. Sukhatme wonders if Damle was just doing her a favor, as he is a family man. Mrs. Kashikar announces that Benare made a pass at Rokde as well. Samant tries to chime in that he was alone with Benare and she acted appropriately, but he's cut off.

By overestimating Benare's age, which is likely 32, Kashikar and Sukhatme attempt to insult and devalue her. In a society that doesn't value older, unmarried women, by suggesting she is older than she is they suggest she is less worthy of respect.



Kashikar genuinely believes the moral problems in society come from women having independence. However, if they marry young, by his logic, they won't be independent and won't pollute society.



Sukhatme continues to equate Benare's singleness with an immoral lifestyle, and further tries to insult her by calling her unflatteringly old.



Kashikar cannot let an opportunity to mock his wife and assert his dominance pass him by. Unfortunately, although also a woman, Mrs. Kashikar feels no sympathy for or solidarity with Benare. Like her husband, Mrs. Kashikar believes unmarried women are inherently promiscuous and immoral. The trial allows her a chance to more publicly share her views.



Once again, Mrs. Kashikar uses the trial to call out aspects of Benare's behavior that she dislikes, accusing her of being immoral for simply living her life in a way that Mrs. Kashikar personally disapproves of.



Mrs. Kashikar suggests, as others did in Act 2, that the fact that Benare is sometimes alone with men means she is definitely doing something nefarious, a sexist assumption that women and men cannot be trusted. Ironically, although Benare likely has been capable of being alone with men with no ulterior motives, because of her pregnancy, she has been using one on one time to find a husband.



Sukhatme dismisses Mrs. Kashikar and calls Rokde as a witness again. As the players shift positions he tells Benare that the “game’s really warmed up.”

Once again, the traumatic trial is framed as a game—a game whose objective seems to be to destroy and embarrass Benare.



Rokde takes the stand. Sukhatme refers to him as Mr. Rokde, but Mrs. Kashikar continues to urge “Balu” to speak. Rokde admits eight days ago Benare held his hand after a performance. He shook her off, arguing it was improper, and she asked him to keep it a secret, threatening him if he spoke out. From the dock, Benare finally speaks, calling out that Rokde is lying, but is ignored.

Even in this important moment for Rokde, who has always wanted to be a witness, Mrs. Kashikar feels the need to take him down and make sure he knows his place. Still, Rokde is able to deliver evidence in the form of a real interaction he had with Benare.



Rokde says he slapped Benare after she threatened him and promised to tell someone. Mrs. Kashikar is surprised, as Rokde had told her other details, but not the slapping. Rokde is allowed to leave the witness box.

Rokde alters the truth — he didn’t slap Benare, she slapped him—likely in order to make himself look more dominant. The context of the trial allows him to pretend to be what he is not.



Ponkshe asks to be called as witness and swears upon the dictionary. Benare stiffens as he begins to speak. He announces that Benare has a bottle of TIK-20, a poison, in her purse. He knows this because she asked him to meet the previous week, and during their meeting a bottle fell out of her bag.

Ponkshe, like others before him and more after, will use this part of the trial to reveal personal details of Benare’s life that would have otherwise been inappropriate to share. The presence of the poison adds more tension to the scene and suggests the depth of Benare’s despair—making her colleagues’ treatment of her all the more cruel.



Sukhatme prompts Ponkshe to discuss the meeting. Benare shakes her head, asking him not to share, but he ignores her. He says Benare wanted to marry him. She told him she was pregnant and wanted his help. He refused her.

Ponkshe clearly cares more about the appearance of piety—refusing to help someone pregnant out of wedlock—than actual piety, which would entail helping a pregnant woman in need.



Ponkshe offers to give a full account of the conversation. Benare stands and shouts “No!” but Kashikar silences her, insisting this is a “matter of social importance” and must be brought to light. Ponkshe hesitates, knowing Benare has asked him to keep their conversation secret, but Kashikar argues that what Benare, the accused, wants is irrelevant and inadmissible in court.

Once again, the performance of continuing for the good of society comes up against actually caring for a member of the troop. The idea that this trial is socially important, when there is literally no audience, is laughable.



Benare comes towards Ponkshe but Mrs. Kashikar, at Kashikar’s urging, takes her back to the dock. At Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar’s urging Rokde helps guard Benare. Mrs. Kashikar tells Benare “discipline means discipline.”

Mrs. Kashikar has expressed her disapproval of Benare’s behavior. “Discipline means discipline” refers both to her behavior in the courtroom at this moment and her independent behavior more generally.



Ponkshe resumes his story. He recounts how Benare mocked the members of their theatre troop calling Sukhatme's practice unsuccessful and speculating Kashikar mistreats Rokde because he thinks that Rokde and Mrs. Kashikar are having an affair. Mrs. Kashikar is offended. Karnik is offended that Benare did not say anything against him.

Ponkshe continues. He explains Benare asked him if he was interested in getting married, hypothetically. He was not, explaining he only wanted a mature partner. Benare wondered if he believed that maturity came from experience, and experience from age. Benare also wondered if maturity necessarily came with the burden of pain from life lived. She then revealed she had a partner for Ponkshe in mind: a woman who just suffered heartbreak and was now pregnant, but wants to raise the child, and believes the best way to protect her child is to get married.

Benare, still talking about her "friend," explained that for this woman "it's the baby that comes first." She said the "friend" worshiped the baby's father's mind, but he only wanted her body. In the courtroom, Ponkshe slips and reveals the child's father was Professor Damle. He says he swore not to say the name, but Sukhatme absolves him, arguing it's not a sin to break an oath inadvertently in court.

Ponkshe continues his story, recounting that Benare begged him to marry her "friend," but he told her he's insulted she thinks he's so worthless as to marry a pregnant woman. Benare then stood up and pretended it was all a joke, and left, though he suspected, from her tears, it was not.

Sukhatme dismisses Ponkshe. He suspects that after failing to convince Ponkshe to marry her, Benare turned to Rokde. Karnik asks to be called to the stand. He reveals that he saw Benare and Rokde's interaction and knows that Rokde did not slap her. Instead, she asked him if he had decided, and Rokde responded he was unable to act without Mrs. Kashikar's permission. Rokde was afraid that people would mock and insult him if he married Benare while she was pregnant. Then he threatened to tell Mrs. Kashikar, at which point Benare slapped him.

This aspect of Ponkshe's story isn't necessarily true. It might be an addition to make Benare look worse and to allow Ponkshe to subtly insult his colleagues. However, Benare has made similar points earlier in the play.



Benare understands that women of a certain age are no longer seen as viable wives. Therefore, she has done her best to spin her age and experience as a virtue and an asset. Additionally, she tries to appeal to Ponkshe's sense of charity, explaining how he would be helping a woman in need (an argument that does not convince him, further underscoring the shallowness of the troop's desire to encourage moral good).



Benare frequently laments that her body works against her—in this case enchanting Damle so much he failed to notice her mind—and therefore doesn't feel quite like her own. Indeed, the society in which she lives would like to control her body. Once again, Ponkshe reveals he cares only about the performance of virtue, and not protecting a vulnerable friend.



Ponkshe, although acting offended, takes the wrong message from Benare's request. She doesn't think he's pathetic; she'd hoped he would be empathetic.



Karnik's disclosure reveals several things. Firstly, it reveals that Rokde was attempting to make himself seem more dominant in his telling of the story. Additionally, he reveals just how subservient Rokde is to the Kashikars, especially Mrs. Kashikar. As opposed to Ponkshe, who was uninterested in helping Benare and saw her request as an insult, Rokde is worried about falling even further down the social ladder.



Karnik has more evidence to share. He knows one of Benare's cousins, who revealed that Benare had attempted suicide in the past. She fell in love with her uncle, and when the relationship ended, she tried to end her life. Sukhatme is shocked by the revelation of this "immoral relationship," and takes it as proof that Benare's past is "smeared in sin." Kashikar calls it "one step away from total depravity."

Benare attempts to stand and leave but Mrs. Kashikar pulls her back. Kashikar reveals that, although he is the judge he also has a piece of evidence that, because the case has such "great social significance" must be shared. Sukhatme, too, agrees tradition should and can be broken.

Kashikar begins to give his evidence. First he insults Benare, calling her and "grown-up unmarried girls" like her "a sinful canker on the body of society." Sukhatme rebukes him for sharing his opinion unasked, but Kashikar is unashamed.

Kashikar reveals he recently visited the home of Nanasaheb Shinde, the local Chairman of Education. When Kashikar arrived, he overheard a phone conversation. Nanasheb was discussing an unmarried pregnant teacher, who was going to be fired, but was fighting her termination. On the phone, Nanasheb argued the woman had sinned, and that she was morally unfit to teach. Kashikar assumes the teacher was Benare. Benare is shocked by this revelation.

Kashikar is sure Benare was the subject of the phone call, although he has no evidence. Benare, in the dock, brings a bottle to her lips but Karnik bats it away. Ponshe picks it up, and sees it is TIK-20. Sukhatme rests the prosecution. Kashikar calls the counsel for the accused. Sukhatme, playing both the prosecution and the defense, becomes suddenly tired and overwhelmed. He calls Professor Damle as witness, then Nanasaheb Shinde, then Mr. Rawte, who are all absent. Sukhatme then asks to cross-examine the witness for the prosecution. Kashikar denies his request, and Sukhatme rests his case.

Kashikar asks the counsel for the prosecution to plead his case. Sukhatme, reenergized as the prosecution, jumps up begins. Kashikar tells him to be brief. He is not. Sukhatme accuses Benare of having made a "heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood," and calls her "public enemy number one." He argues that if others followed in her "socially destructive" footsteps society itself would collapse.

The reaction to Karnik's revelation is more shocking than the revelation itself. Although Benare was groomed and abused by a child predator, the court can only see her immoral behavior, and not the crime committed by her trusted uncle who coerced and seduced her.



Yet again, "social significance" trumps all traditional order and reason. Although Kashikar is the judge his evidence is deemed so important that he must disrupt the order of the court.



Kashikar uses the court to legitimize his personal opinions. Even when Sukhatme pushes back, he does so gently, and Kashikar is unfazed.



Yet again, the behavior of unmarried women is assumed to be immoral, and this immorality assumed to be contagious. Although it is not logical to assume that having sex out of marriage would disqualify someone from being a teacher, many in the play suffer from this belief.



Benare, more and more convinced her life is over, and so humiliated he doesn't want to go on, believes killing herself is the best way forwards. Unfortunately, instead of helping her or acknowledging her despair, the members of the court merely abort her attempt and force her to continue to stand trial.



Sukhatme continues to argue that Benare has acted immorally by becoming pregnant outside of marriage, which has disqualified her from being a good mother. He goes on to argue that mothers are essential to keeping society moral, and that mothers are therefore contractually bound to act in a way (he, personally) finds moral. Once again, Sukhatme uses the court to legitimize his own sexist opinions.



Sukhatme argues Benare's greatest crime is not infanticide, but unwed motherhood, and her intention to be a single parent. Sukhatme believes women are responsible for building up society's values, and worries Benare, and those like her will lead to society-wide immorality. He ends his plea with a call for a harsh punishment for Benare.

Sukhatme changes his demeanor, becoming the downcast defense lawyer. He gives a brief statement. As the defense Sukhatme admits the crime is serious but asks for mercy for Benare.

Kashikar asks Benare if she wishes to speak. He gives her ten seconds. Before Benare speaks music bings to play, the light changes, and the assembled court freezes in time. Benare stands and delivers a speech. She explains she's spent years silencing herself, and so has a lot to say. She explains how her life felt burdensome to her, but after her failed suicide attempt she realized "the value of living," and appreciated the world anew. Still, she now feels "life is drudgery" and "life is a fraud."

Benare then begins to think of her own employment status, how good she was at her job and how cruelly she was fired. Although she "swallowed ... poison" herself she didn't pass it along to her students, instead teaching them beauty and purity. Benare, suddenly playing the role of teacher, leaves the dock. Lights illuminate the faces in the court and she addresses them as children. Then a school bell rings, and children chatter, before fading to silence. Benare becomes frightened, feeling intensely alone.

Benare admits she "did commit a sin," falling in love with her uncle at fourteen. Her parents were strict, and he was kind to her. At the time, she explains, she didn't understand what sin was. She wanted to marry her uncle and live openly, but her mother and her uncle opposed her. Benare was so angry at her uncle's betrayal she tried to kill herself but failed.

As an adult, Benare fell in love again. She assumed it would be different than when she loved her uncle. She loved Damle for his intelligence, but he was only interested in her body. She believes "the body is a traitor," and both loves and hates it. Although her body distracted Damle from her mind, now she is grateful for her body because it holds her child within it.

Because Sukhatme believes women must uphold the values of society, those that don't, according to his logic, are actively contributing to the collapse of morality. Because he sees Benare as one of those women, and because he has the platform, Sukhatme calls for her punishment.



Even as her defense lawyer, Sukhatme cannot let go of his personal belief that Benare has committed an unforgivable crime that deserves punishment.



This is a rare moment in which the theatricality of the play itself, not just that of the fictitious trial, is emphasized. Although Benare cannot speak during the trial itself, her inner thoughts are dramatized for the audience, allowing her an opportunity to plead her case to them. She makes a comprehensive rebuttal to the case made against her.



Repeatedly accused of passing her immorality on to her students, Benare makes it clear that she kept her private life separate from them and remained an upstanding educator. The realism of the play is suspended further through the sounds of the classroom. This reference to Benare's career underscores its importance in her life and the unfairness of her persecution, given that she had been a good, devoted teacher.



Benare has internalized what she's been told—that being in love with her uncle was sinful, although in fact she was the victim of an elder authority figure's advances. This is an example of how morality and justice can be perverted and harmful. Instead of getting help or counseling, Benare was left with shame.



As Ponshe reported Benare saying earlier in the act, Benare has disliked her body, which she felt attracted attention she didn't want, and distracted men she did. Now, ironically, an unwanted pregnancy has allowed her to take her body back—she feels it has a purpose.



Benare finishes her speech. She explains she wants her body for her baby. She wants her baby to have a mother, and a father, and “a good name.” The court unfreezes. Kashikar announces time is up, and that Benare has no statement.

Kashikar has Rokde retrieve his wig and puts it on before delivering the verdict. He announces that Benare will not be forgiven, for the sake of society and social customs. However, he thinks her biggest crime is her arrogance, and the risk of her passing her immorality on to her students. He is glad that she has been fired. He wants to ensure she does not pass her sin on to future generations, and so her punishment will be an abortion. Benare screams and sobs, coming to the center of the room, collapsing in grief. The court remains silent.

As Benare cries, someone unlocks the door from the outside. A townspeople peeks in, and wonders if The Living Courtroom has begun. The people of the court shake themselves and “return ... to normal.” Samant tells the villagers the show will begin soon. The men discuss how late it is, and how the time got away from him. Sukhatme exclaims that they had fun, and that he felt like he was “fighting a real case.”

The group turns to Benare, who is motionless on the ground. Mrs. Kashikar comments on how sensitive Benare is, and Kashikar, Sukhatme, and Ponshe reassert that the whole thing was just a game. Mrs. Kashikar shakes Benare to try and get her to respond. Ponshe sends Samant to get tea for Benare. Kashikar notices the bottle of TIK-20, still on the judge’s table. He pauses, then urges the others to follow him into the next room and prepare for the show.

Benare and Samant remain onstage. Samant goes to collect the cloth parrot he brought with him. He hesitates before leaving and sets the parrot down respectfully near Benare. Although she remains silent and still, her voice begins to sing from speakers in the theatre. The speakers play a song from earlier in which a parrot asks a **sparrow** why she’s crying, and she says her nest has been stolen. They ask a crow if he’s seen where it went, but he hasn’t, and asks “what are your troubles to do with me?” The light changes, illuminating only Benare. The curtain falls.

After a lifetime of hating, resenting, and being punished for her body, Benare has finally come to terms with it, as she has found a good purpose for it. Though the men in the troop view motherhood as further means to control women, Benare sees it, in part, as empowering.



In the final moments of the trial Kashikar uses his power as a (play-acted) judge to make a judgment on Benare. He has decided that her personal immorality is less important than the impact her behavior could have on the next generation. Although, ironically, the trial started as one for infanticide, now the punishment itself is the death of a (unborn) child. This again suggests that the men’s obsession with motherhood and being a good role model for the next generation is more about controlling women than it is about those children themselves.



Although Sukhatme and others repeatedly insisted to Benare the case was “just a game,” now that it’s over Sukhatme can admit it felt real, both to him, and presumably, Benare. However, his empathy stops there, and he is unable to see how Benare might feel devastated.



Although they have caused Benare’s meltdown, both by forcing her to sit through the trial and by refusing to help her in the days and weeks before when she reached out, Benare’s colleagues now suddenly seem concerned, insisting the whole thing was a game. This seems like a lie to assuage their own guilt at their mistreatment of Benare.



Benare’s voiceover sings the same song from earlier in the play, this time in full. The song repeats the events of Benare’s life in allegory; her nest—that is, her future—has been stolen from her, and only a parrot (Samant) seems to care at all. The crows (her fellow thespians) don’t care about her troubles and are only interesting in performing morality without charity.





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