

**Discuss the character of Miss Leela Benare.**

The protagonist of the play, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Leela Benare is an unmarried teacher in her 30's; and a member of the cast of the *Living Courtroom* (a performance in which the actors re-enact a famous legal trial from the past). Miss Benare has been carrying on an affair with Professor Damle, another member of the cast. During the affair, after she becomes pregnant, however, Damle cuts her off. Benare has also been recently fired from her job, as her superiors view unmarried motherhood as sinful. They are also worried that somehow Benare will pass on her immorality to her students.

*Silence! The Court is in Session* explores a new Indian woman through Miss Leela Benare. The play tries to focus on her attempt to construct an oppositional discourse against an oppressive patriarchal dictate that she can retain her body but not the illegitimate child growing in it. She is new in that she dares transgress the patriarchal norms of society by giving prominence to erotic connection with men in order to secure association with them. Through her deeds, she valorises female sexuality.

Benare is also a new woman in that she dares re-inscribe her past in the present for the future. She searches for something to believe in such as love and motherhood. Moreover, she projects herself as a professional career woman with a civilising mission; which she tries to fulfill through her teaching of the little children at the school where she works. However, her school-teaching career is now a matter of the past. She is neither docile, submissive; nor subjugated. She has a personal political agenda concerned not with what she is; but with what she should do to overcome her precarious situation. In order to materialise her agenda, she desperately searches for a man who would father her child growing in her and help her attain the status of motherhood: even though she has been impregnated by another man whom she loved, but by whom she was betrayed.

As the play opens, we find Benare equipped with an anti-imperialistic consciousness. She is committed to spread enlightened ideas through theatre against American imperialism that has found manifestation through the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In the mock-trial that follows, she dominates her male and female associates belonging to Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association: an amateur theatre troupe in Bombay. Intelligent, witty Benare exposes their weaknesses and relegates them to an inferior position.

In caustic terms Benare describes all of her associates in the theatre troupe to Samant. She says that all of Mr Kashikar's actions are taken with a 'prime objective' in mind. Mrs Kashikar is "Mrs Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle". Benare ridicules her like this because Mrs Kashikar is childless. In order to fulfill the desire of motherhood, the Kashikar couple had adopted Balu Rokde: who, in Miss Leela Benare's view, though educated by the them, is treated like a slave. Sukhatme, as an unsuccessful lawyer, sits and keeps "swatting flies with legal precedents!" Ponshe, as Benare tells Samant, is a "Sci-en-tist! Inter-failed!" Though he tries to cut an impressive figure by keeping a pipe always in his mouth. Professor Damle, with whom she had an affair and whose baby she is carrying, also, does not

escape her criticism. In her view, he might be an intellectual, taking pride in displaying his bookish knowledge: but flees in the face of 'real-life' problems.

Benare is a woman with a civilising mission that she tries to fulfill through her teaching job and her theatrical performances. As a teacher, she is efficient, meticulous, punctual, and serious. She loves teaching the children who are far better than adults on more than one ground. They never pose as if they know everything, never stuff their heads with nonsense (by which she means the nonsensical patriarchal norms of society), and unlike adults they never hurt others and then run away 'like cowards.' The schoolchildren love her as much as they fear her. Out of love and regard, they are ready to do anything for her. But her colleagues and the school management are jealous of her success with the students. They have held an 'enquiry' against her: "Just because of one bit of slander". As she says, she is not afraid to face any challenges, because she dislikes to be governed by the dictation of others, whoever she/he may be: a colleague or an employer. Miss Leela Benare likes to lead life on her own terms. This shows she is not an ordinary woman to be subjugated and frightened by any external power. Rather as a lover of autonomy and freedom: she declares she would try to fulfill her desires and will in a way independent of the patriarchal society's codes of conduct.

Benare's first experience of love was bitter, when she fell in love with her maternal uncle. Benare was not an ordinary girl. After the failure of her affair with her own maternal uncle, instead of being governed by her mother: she made an attempt to exercise her right over life by committing suicide: but she was saved. In this case also, she always carries a bottle of Tik-20 with her. These attempts to take her life refer to her urge for emancipation from patriarchal domination.

In the course of her conversation with Samant, Miss Benare is found out to be full of life, intelligent, spirited and vivacious. Frank and modern, she has no hesitation in making romantic advances towards Samant. At 34, still unmarried, she searches for a man who would marry her and be a father-figure to the child growing in her womb. The marriage proposals she has offered to other men: have already been turned down. Hence, we find her flirting with Samant: who, with his rural innocence and simplicity, fails to understand her proposal of marriage.