



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.3. 2020 (July-Sept)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A REFLECTION OF THE INNER STRIFE IN SELECT PLAYS OF MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR

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Article information
Received:10/06/2020
Accepted: 22/07/2020
Published online: 28/07/2020
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.3.27](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.3.27)

ABSTRACT

Mahesh Elkunchwar follows a very unique approach in his works. Through the genre of drama he aims at exhibiting the inner tussle that humans go through. Every external conflict definitely has its roots from some inner tremor and subsequently further affects the inner state of human heart and mind too. It is this inner distress that Elkunchwar's plays foreground. Thereby, Elkunchwar's deep understanding of human psychology and human compulsions is proved, establishing his repute as one of the most successful contemporary dramatists. The themes vary, from sexuality, and patriarchal concerns in *Garbo* and *Desire in the Rocks*, to changing economic order and caste system in *Old Stone Mansion*, and to existential concerns in *Sonata*, but the approach that Elkunchwar employs is similar. His focus is the inner, and he begins from the inner, prioritizes the inner struggle, while also showing the ramifications of these issues on the external, material reality of our lives.

Keywords: inner, strife, purpose/meaning, dilemma

Mahesh Elkunchwar is a playwright par excellence. His works are contemporary, progressive and are bound to move the audience/ reader. Elkunchwar writes mostly in Marathi, but his works are acknowledged as one of the most widely translated plays in Indian literary scene today. His works have not only impacted the audience, but his genius has also influenced other contemporary Indian playwrights, like Mahesh Dattani. This paper confines itself to four of his works, namely *Garbo*, *Desire in the Rocks*, *Old Stone Mansion* and *Sonata*. His themes are varied but there is an inherent coherence amongst these works. It is this coherence that this paper seeks to address. Elkunchwar proves to be a master of the psychological understanding of the characters he creates. His plays are not melodramatic; do not have any overt action, i.e. unlike Vijay Tendulkar's plays like- *Ghasiram Kotwal*, *A Friend's Story*, *Kanyadaan* etc., where there is intense external activity, Elkunchwar's plays do not exhibit such action. Nonetheless, his plays have their desired impact, because their approach and intention is different. Elkunchwar aims at foregrounding the internal struggle, the inner depravity, the dilemma, the psychological tussle that humans undergo. More than the external action is the internal turbulence in our minds, and the external action is the manifestation of the inner self. Elkunchwar is intensely aware of the modern scenario, where with the surplus of opportunities in urban areas, there have been manifold repercussions of such materialistic growth. Inner chaos has been a direct outcome of extreme utilitarian, pragmatism of the modern world, where emotional stability is pushed to the periphery. The four plays under consideration here present no gleeful scenes, there are no joyous celebrations, and there is no character is any of these plays who represent a content life.

Shrimant, Intuc and Pansy, the three characters in the play *Garbo* are emblematic of problematic existence in contemporary life. They are all living a purposeless life and are constantly searching for meaning and purpose. In the words of Deshpande it is, "an absurdist play...thoroughly contemptuous of bourgeois pretensions." (31) Shrimant is a wealthy businessman, Intuc is a professor and a poet and Pansy is a young boy who has eloped from his home. They all live together at Shrimant's place, sharing and partaking in each other's inner depravity. Shrimant shoulders the burden of putting up the façade of a heterosexual male to maintain societal image. Intuc lacks inspiration, creativity and originality to compose worthy poems. Pansy is a disillusioned youth looking for anchor and love, stuck in a homosexual relationship with Shrimant. *Garbo* is a figment of their imagination, a B-grade movie actor and a prostitute. The three are attached to her for physical pleasure, and it is through their conversations that the absurdity of their lives is revealed. *Garbo* represents fertile female, hounded by the patriarchal world. Her revelation of her pregnancy reveals instantly the spinelessness of each of these men, who are scared of having a hand in this. Soon, they realize that this could be one opportunity towards redemption, regeneration and getting purpose. While Shrimant feels he could reinstate his societal reputation by accepting the child as his own, Intuc feels he could get inspiration towards creativity, by taking care of *Garbo* during this natural creation of a baby. Pansy too decides to share the responsibility in hope of finding some meaning in life. *Garbo*, who is initially a victim of their filthy talk, the receiver of their pent up frustrations, becomes a symbol of regeneration and hope for them and they urge her to give them the collective responsibility of helping in her pregnancy and later in bringing up her child. *Garbo* on the other hand is unable to defy patriarchal norms, which do not expect a female actor or a whore or an unwed female to bear children, and she succumbs to them by opting to abort. *Garbo*, the illusion that the three men create to escape the sterility of their lives, dies in the end, leaving the three in the perpetual despair and gloominess of unproductivity.

Desire in the Rocks is similarly about the inner tumult Hemkant and Lalita go through. Lalita is the adopted daughter of Hemkant's father, but separated by years, they lived together very briefly in their childhood. After DadaSahib's death all his property is passed on to Lalita, yet she suffers in her isolation. The family never thrived because the house was believed to be cursed with barrenness; every offspring was still-born. Hemkant, a sculptor is proud of his art, and reveres it as a supreme form of creation surpassing every other thing. He seduces Lalita into an incestuous relationship, but does not reciprocate the love she gives him. While she gives her entire self to him, he gives his entire self to his art. This play too has little action on stage, and more of a presentation of the inner tumult of these characters. Lalita initially battles the moral dilemma of finding refuge in an incestuous relationship; once she takes her stand she fights Hemkant's cold behavior towards her. Once the society gets to know of it and of Lalita's pregnancy, the lovers are publically prosecuted, while his sculptures are ruined. This is when Hemkant realizes the truth of his impassive, indifferently harsh behavior towards Lalita. Lalita turns to prostitution (told not shown), her child is still born and later they reconcile, Hemkant apologizes and they set their mansion on fire. The inner moral depravity of man, his effort to find happiness in materialistic things, while ignoring God's ultimate creation- fellow humans and their emotions is the theme of this play.

Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion*, is a reflection of the struggle caused by the change of economic order, with the coming up of urban opportunities. The rural landowning Brahmins, with their age old caste superiority are unable to cope with the changing economic scene. Their servants, the lower castes gradually migrate to cities with better economic opportunities and equality of status, while their condition deteriorates. It is just the caste-pride and prestige that they cling to and since they are unable to shed it, they hardly work towards alleviating their condition, for they are used to having work done for them. The play begins in the Deshpande household after the death of the father figure-Tatyaji, who had been trying to improve conditions. At his death, the younger son Sudhir and his wife Anjali come from Bombay to partake in his last rites. The elder son Bhaskar decides to do all the rites and rituals for Tatyaji, despite their reduced circumstances, in order to maintain the family prestige. "The vanities of Indian traditions are also very much revealed through the ritualistic practices and the arrangements made by Bhaskar and his family after the death of Venkatesh." (Dey 25) Each of them wants to save what little money they have, hence all relationships are strained. While

Bhaskar thinks Sudhir must have a very comfortable life in Bombay, Sudhir has been toiling hard, and aspires to get his share of the ancestral property. Prabha, Tatyaji's daughter is a middle aged maiden, who wanted to study while Tatyaji denied. She still nurtures the hope of using her share of ancestral jewelry for her further studies and then working elsewhere to give her mother and herself a comfortable independent life. The mother gives her share of the land, so that they may sell it and use the money for Tatyaji's rites. Only Chandu, the youngest son is selfless and works for the family, works as a slave and demands nothing in return. The climax of the play leaves everyone's hopes shattered when Ranju elopes with all the ancestral jewelry (symbolic of ancestral pride). While Sudhir helps to bring her back, they are unable to retrieve the jewelry. All hopes are shattered, and the conditions are bound to worsen further. Bhaskar's son Parag, an alcoholic, hoped to better his life by going to Bombay with Sudhir, but due to his meager resources and Abhay's (Sudhir's son) dislike for Parag he is not taken. There is no major advancement in the play, nothing actually happens except Ranju's fleeing and loss of jewelry. It is the inner strife that everyone goes through, which is reflected in their conversations. The degenerating family, Bhaskar's caste-pride, his desire to hide all ancestral jewelry, his grudges and assumptions about Sudhir's life in Mumbai, Chandu's exploitation at the hands of his own family, Prabha's shattered dreams, the grandmother's meaningless existence (symbolizing meaninglessness of caste superiority) all of these reflect the intense mental trauma that the family was going through. In the words of Deshpande, "[w]ith a sensitive, almost anthropological gaze, he dissects the inner dynamics of a family that disintegrates as the village economy that sustained it hitherto crumbles." (31)

The play *Sonata*, is probably the best exemplification of inner strife. The action of the play is confined to one room of Dolon's house. There is very little action on the stage, in terms of activity, but there is too much action in terms of displaying human psyche. The three female characters represent three different worldviews and ethics, but are all struggling with similar existential issues of finding meaning, asserting identity, finding happiness. Aruna has bound herself to her traditional, conservative views. Though a successful Sanskrit academician, and a writer, she lacks courage to break shackles that confine her. Dolon, who spends her money extravagantly, tries to find happiness in collecting perfume bottles, and tries to break open the chains that confine them, is unsuccessful too. "As the play progresses we find how they continue to survive within the "bad faith" of existentialism. In the process of tormenting, drinking, smoking, and collecting the empty perfume bottles they search for their happiness and satisfaction."(Dey 23) Dolon accuses Aruna of misconstruing her ways of showing affection through physical touch, and of basing the protagonist of the award winning short story on her life, without permission. In the end she confesses of having once cheated Aruna, by having physical relationship with Aruna's ex-partner. Subhadra is the only character who is able to trespass the confines of the four walls, and break norms and reserves. She asserts herself at both professional and private space, but ultimately out of affection and habitual existence, she submits to her violent relationship with Sangram. While Aruna battles to experience the world, she is unable to break through the walls of norms, though temporarily she does- by consuming alcohol; Dolon struggles to find satisfaction, in an overt submission to her id (pleasure drive). The play ends with almost no difference in their external realities, stuck still in the existential question of finding meaning in life. "This reveals the ultimate inescapable existential reality of the human civilization."(Dey 23) Elkunchwar is aware of the reality of modern man. More than anything else, inner struggle hounds our lives today. This inner struggle in the face complexities of external life is dramatized by Elkunchwar in his works.

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