

SEARCH OF SPACE AND PEACE IN THE SELECTED PLAYS OF MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR

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Abstract

Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays are termed as 'Great Psychological War in the Heart of Silence'. Elkunchwar (1939-Present) is one of the finest Indian Marathi playwrights. He has written more than twenty plays, in addition to his theoretical writings, critical works and his active work in India's Parallel Cinema as actor and screenwriter. Apart from Vijay Tendulkar Elkunchwar has been influenced by a number of Western writers like Anton Chekov, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. His is considered as a successor to Vijay Tendulkar. Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays are written in Marathi, the Indian language that is spoken by approximately 120 million people. The significant factor about Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays is they take us into the world of loneliness, darkness, alienation, struggle, stress and old traditions. In Elkunchwar's plays readers and audience meet restless characters and their life full of killing silences which leads them towards a dark future and the present research paper deals with the character's search of peace hidden behind restless, stressful silences.

Key Words: *loneliness, darkness, struggle, search, space, peace.*

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Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays are termed as 'Great Psychological War in the Heart of Silence.' Mahesh Elkunchwar (1939-Present) is one of the finest Indian Marathi playwrights. He has written more than twenty plays, in addition to his theoretical writings, critical works and his active work in India's Parallel Cinema as actor and screenwriter. Apart from Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar has been influenced by a number of Western writers like Anton Chekov, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. He is considered as a successor to Vijay Tendulkar. Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays are written in Marathi, the Indian language that is spoken by approximately 120 million people. The significant factor about Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays is they take us into the world of loneliness, darkness, alienation, struggle, stress and old traditions. In Elkunchwar's plays readers and audience meet restless characters and their life full of killing silences which leads them towards a dark future. In 1984 Elkunchwar's play *Holi*(1969), was made into a film by Ketan Mehta for which he wrote the screenplay. In the same year Govind Nihalani directed a film *Party* based on his eponymous play. Elkunchwar emerged onto the National Theatre scene with the publication of his one-act-play *Sultan* in 1967 in noted literary magazine *Satyakatha*. Vijaya Mehta directed four plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar including *Holi* and *Sultan* in 1969 and 1970 for *Rangayan*. Apart from plays like *Rudravarsha* (*The Savage Year*, 1968), *Zumber* (1967), *Eka Mhataracha Khoon*(*An Old Man's Murder*, 1968), *Kaifiyat*(1967), *Garbo* (1970), *Pratibimb*(*Reflection*1987) and so on. Mahesh Elkunchwar has also written Collection of Essays named *Maunraag*, *Baatheet* and *Tribandh*. The plays which are selected for the present study are the English translation of original Marathi plays, *Pratibimb* (*Reflection*, 1987), *Wada Chirebandi* (*Old Stone Mansion*, 1985), *Magna Talyakathi* (*The Pond*, 1991), and *Yuganta* (*Apocalypse*, 1985). Excluding *Reflection* all the other three plays are known as *Wada Trilogy*.

Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays are loaded with psychological realities hidden under the surface of pauses, silences, alienation, and darkness. And his characters struggle to reach towards their

destination-Space and Peace in their lives. All the selected plays are the best specimen for this. There is a constant psychological fights goes on in *Old Stone Mansion*, and *Reflection*.

Search of Space and Peace in *Old Stone Mansion*, *The Pond* and *Apocalypse*

There are many pauses and silences which are symbolic of stressful life, life full of negativity, loss of identity, loneliness. *Old Stone Mansion* centers on Deshpande family. *Old Stone Mansion* is the first play of the Wada trilogy. The other two plays are *The Pond* and *Yuganta*. The very common thing about Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays is violence. Vijay Tendulkar's plays portrayed the violence on stage openly while Elkunchwar's plays throw light upon the violence going on inside the human mind. Elkunchwar's characters struggle for relief from their painful present. But there is no ray of hope for them. Their present existence is futile while future is also dark. This darkness is a symbol of death, loss of peace of mind and lack of space in life. A constant unending struggle goes on in their lives. The characters Bhaskar, Sudhir, Anjali, Vahini, Dadi, Aai, Chandu, Ranju, Abhay, Nandini all of them are fighting externally and internally to get rid of from their pain and sufferings. Sudhir and Bhaskar's sister Prabha wants to get rid of the shackles of old worthless traditions, which in her past did not allow her to go for higher education. Right from the beginning till the tragic end of her life she remained as a helpless character in search of peace and little space for her desires to blossom in her life. Her desires from her life were not very high; they are just like any ordinary human being. When her father was alive he did not allow his daughter Prabha to take education. And in *Old Stone Mansion* her frustration can be noticed through her dialogues like:

Prabha: I must live off whatever crumbs you brothers throw me now. You've all right. You'll take your share and go off to Bombay. But let me tell you Sudhir, it's not even five days since Tatyaji died. Five days And Vahini has changed already. The house keys moved instantly into her keep. And Aai went instantly into the shadows of the back room. When Tatyaji was alive, you couldn't hear Vahini's footfall on the veranda. But within five days her orders are heard way outside the Wada¹.

(Elkuchwar, M.2009 *Collected Plays of Elkunchwar*, p.141)

And this quench for knowledge was never fulfilled. On the other hand, Anjali and Sudhir are the city dwellers now. Sudhir is Bhaskar's younger brother who is also struggling for peace and space in life. There are conflicts and conflicts in every character's life. Bhaskar and Sudhir are in tension due to the conflict of their interests over property and gold. Bhaskar knows that the mansion is turning into a heap of dust and so he collects all gold and keeps it in the brass box. His tension increases when Ranju runs away with all that gold. Parag's waywardness gives him more tension. Sudhir has to live in Mumbai, the installments deducted from his pay packet, his son's education and the daily necessities of decent life in the city have made him miserable. He demands his share. Prabha's tension is of a different nature as she has lost on all the fronts of her life and now the loss of gold has caged her in the dark dungeon. Chandu is always under pressure and does not know how to proceed except being a beast of burden in the household. These conflicts finally lead to the sad farewell, the tragic separation and end of many lives. In the second part of Wada Trilogy, *The Pond* Chandu meets a tragic end. Prabha's life also ends tragically looking outside window in loneliness; no one was near her at the time of her last moments of life. Though physically she dies in *Yuganta* but she had already died inside, at psychological level. Throughout her life she searches for her space in her family, and peace of mind in her life. Prabha's case is illustrative of psychological suppression. Preventing her to take education has led to her 'unmarried status' which causes the most acute psychological disturbance. Silent suffering without a moan or a sigh is what Chandu does who is almost enchained, enslaved creature like a yoked bullock in the Deshpande household. The crumbling of Deshpande mansion starts in the first part of Wada Trilogy. Deshpande family has to sell a part of the mansion where Bansilal will set a saw-mill for the funeral rites of the departed father. Vyankatesh Deshpande –Tatyaji. Aai is about to be Dadi and Vahini's fate will not be different. The mother or Aai is a helpless observer in Deshpande family she has accepted the bitter reality of her life that now no one is ready to take care of the post funeral expenses of her husband. She decides to sell her share of to manage the expenses of her husband's post funeral expenses. Though throughout her life span she remains silent but inside her mind she is at struggle. She is worried about her daughter Prabha's future. There is no place and peace for Aai in her own house. She can observe the crumbling of her family where everyone gathered for the sake of their share in property. There is a contrast in this union of family; they united to depart from relationships. Bhaskar, Sudhir, Abhay have created their own world in city life and rural life.

Relationships are now burden for them. Sudhir and his wife Anjali's only concern are Gold ornaments, antic objects of Wada. Bhaskar, Prabha and Chandu will have to bear all the tensions caused on account of the conflicts of self-interests and conflicts caused by greed, dishonesty, poverty and disintegration of the joint family system. Mahesh Elkunchwar has dramatically presented conflicts and consequently tension in the play *Old Stone Mansion* very effectively.

Search of Space and Peace reflected through Technical Effects in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion and Reflection*

Girish Karnad has translated and directed many plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar into Kannada language. While talking about Mahesh Elkunchwar's style he says:

'What sets Mahesh apart among Indian playwrights is his command of the broken phrase, the sentence half-uttered, the casual pause in his hands these silences can be lethal and communicate a menace that would be scattered in a collection of fully expressive sentences. Every time I have taken on a text of his, I have enjoyed the crispness of sentences often left-cliff hanging, the deliberate avoidance of a direct reply, and the poignancy created by any direct verbal contact. His plays are resonant with the dhvani (sound) of the words he has chosen to use or throw away.'²

The innovative technical effects play a crucial role in the play *Old Stone Mansion*. These technical effects play a role of 'speech' in *Old Stone Mansion*. As far as the light effects are concerned, there is darkness of night throughout the first scene of the first act and the entire second act of the play. This darkness is significant because the fortunes of the Deshpande mansion and also of the Deshpande family are totally darkened because the mansion is about to be a heap of dust and rubble. While commenting upon his own writing style Mahesh Elkunchwar says:

'I have somehow never been interested in the externalities. It is the journey into the interior of the mind that has been an obsession with me. It is difficult to say why I keep travelling to the interior but, perhaps it has to do with the fact that the life we see around us is transient and does not give my creative instincts a call. The process that is internal is, however, more permanent and unchanging, and flows steadily below the effervescent reality. It is the inner landscape that it provides clues to this mystery called life.'³

The innovative technical effect increases the intensity of the character's need to get rid off from the tensions of life and bring peace of mind in their life. The play *Reflection* opens with the triple ringing of bells alarm in the timepiece near the pillow by the side of the bed on which the protagonist 'He' is sleeping around 7 in the morning on the day of action, that is inaction. Though it is a day on which nothing happens, there are many dramatic effects produced through the effective use of sound and light effects. The doorbell rings, the alarm sounds and the telephone begins to ring. The triple ringing makes 'He' much more confused.

Search of Space and Peace reflected through Symbolism in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion and Reflection*

Loss of values and peace in life can be noticed in *Old Stone Mansion*. In the play *Old Stone Mansion* stands for tradition, old culture, universal human values of love and goodwill and the joint family structure of the old times. With the loss of meaning of human values Deshpande family's members has lost the peace in their life. They are merely left to watch the ashes of their bygone good past and now they are just scarecrows without life in them. The crumbling state of the old stone mansion symbolizes the collapse of the old traditional values and the break between tradition and modernity. Old human values are replaced by the new commercial self-centered conduct of the protagonist. In *Reflection* the title itself suggests that there is loss of identity and loss of identity means loss of peace. Reflection is a title and main symbol in the play. The protagonist 'He' has lost his reflection, his shadow. This reflection symbolically stands for the protagonist identity, his second self, and his self-hood. He is helpless and he finds that helplessness has entered in his mind and life because he is now without his reflection. He cannot stand on his own. Reflection symbolizes Existence, Life and Liveliness of Human Life. Reflection is spirit of Manhood which 'He' the protagonist has lost and this accidental lapse leads him to end his own existence.

Search of Space and Peace reflected in Mahesh Elkuchwar's *Reflection*

Woman, He, Flags and Girl are the characters in *Reflection* and they appear on the stage in the order indicated. Of these four characters the protagonist of action or rather the passive inaction of the play is 'He'. He is called by others by the nickname 'Blockhead' which all the others think to be quite appropriate considering He's temperament and negativity of approach.

His life is characterized by his inaction, his rootless, hopeless and meaningless life. He is constantly searching a relief from the clutches of rat race of life, he wants peace of mind but his expectations from life remained unfulfilled. He is already confused as is noticed in the initial part of the play when the three bells of telephone, doorbell and of the clock begin to ring simultaneously. His confusion grows and He loses his self-confidence when He realizes that he has lost his reflection. He fears that he is not in a fix and is unable to cope with the dilemma of his existence itself. Though he is known to be 'Blockhead' his head is not blocked but he is very much confused being subjected to all types of pressures and being enchained to all kinds of tensions, now the tension of conflicts has become unbearable for the protagonist 'He'.

On the psychological level He' has lost his peace of mind with the loss of his reflection. Now his tension has increased because in addition to 'Blockhead' he is likely to be called now 'The man without His Reflection, A man without the shadow', or 'A Shadow-less man'. His life has been an unending saga of sufferings loss of identity, loss of peace and space, conflicts. His march across the path of life has always been crossed by the petty conflicts and major events of misfortune. Now Reflection has reached the climax of tensions. The protagonist does not know which is the worst tragedy in his life is it his lack of pluck or his loss of reflection. This has made him so much confused that the tension caused by various conflicts leads him to the tragic failure. The only option that is available to him now is to end his existence as he does not know whether he really exists or not. He is the 'paying guest' in the flat rented out to him by She. This is another character that functions as the dictator who can mould the thought process of her tenant He the Blockhead, the Dullard the Dunce. Woman is the functional figure in the play and her job is to give all comforts. The mind of the protagonist is almost photographically and visually presented on the stage through the door and the window through which woman goes out frequently and comes in through the window and He rarely goes out and comes in. Woman makes these symbolically expressionistic objects more relevant to the dramatic action in Reflection.

..Now this window. It's the window to your mind right? If I came through there I enter your mind. (Elkunchwar, M. 2009 Collected plays of Elkunchwar Act I p.211/ Reflection)₄

Woman demonstrates how she can exist and enter through the window of her tenant's room and also his mind. She comments that the window of her tenant's mind is both narrow and tight. His loss of reflection is a graphically visual representation of his mental status.

In the play, *Reflection* there are two more characters 'Flags' and 'Girl'. These are stereotypes of two representative figures. 'Flags' is the character that presents the stereotyped figure of the Union leader, Flags is militant and aggressive. The steps of his rise need to be noted. The other character is that of Girl who represents Love and Sympathy in the play. She is lost in thoughts and therefore she remains disinterested in everything else. The life of these characters needs comment on the action or rather inaction of the play *Reflection*. Isolated lives are lived by the tenant 'He' and his widowed landlady 'woman'. They lead the life which is stereotyped life of a clerk and a cook respectively. Their lives are socially irrelevant. It does not matter whether they are alive or their existence has come to an end. Their lives are colourless, featureless with unmarked stains on the drive of life. There is neither splendor nor any grandeur in their lives. Their lives are worthless; they are the garbage in these days of questioning search for identity. They are mere heaps of scrapes of paper who are groping to find the nonexistent meaning in their bare existence. They do not belong anywhere. They cannot perform any significant action. They cannot whine, they cannot bang, and they are just capable of whimper of sighs of tears, of nothingness and of no background. They do not belong to any group, any tribe, and community or to any society. Therefore the lack of social background marks the tiny meaningless existence of these men and women. The social background of their lives is marked by the unremarkable period of questions without answers, problems without solutions, debates without argument and speech without communication. They do not know 'who they are' and wait for the inevitable end that come at the end of dark tunnel of uncertainty.

Endnotes:

1. Bandyopadhyay, S. *Collected Plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.(p.141)
2. Internet source <swarajyamag.com/culture/maheshelkunchwar-where-silence-speaks-more-than-words>
3. *ibid*

4. Bandyopadhyay, S. *Collected Plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. (p211)

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