

Portrayal of Urban Middle Class in the Selected Plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar



Abhay Nath Thakur
Guest Assistant Professor
B.S.R.S. College, Pachadhi
Darbhanga, Bihar, India

Abstract

Mahesh Elkunchwar is an Indian Playwright. He is also a screen play writer. He has written and produced some of the most influential and progressive plays of Post Independent India. He has got more than twenty plays in his name. He was born on 9th October 1939. In 2014 he was awarded the “Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship”. His plays have gained national and international critical attention. His growing body of work has become part of India’s post-colonial theatrical concern. This research paper aims to present in a humble manner how Mahesh Elkunchwar’s plays portrays the urban middle class of contemporary Indian society in a realistic manner. His wide ranging themes-the passage of time and mortality, identity and sexuality, religious tensions and gender issues, human bonding and alienation-focus on human relationships and personal and moral choices which are the classic concerns of all great works of literature. He is a socially committed artist.

Keywords:- Consumerism, Alienation, Morality, Urbanization, Degradation

Introduction

In India, the theatrical art is called the “Fifth Veda”. It is regarded as something holy and religious activity since its inception. It speaks beyond the region, race, rank, position, class, cast, gender etc. It decodes the message and defines meaning of life. Elkunchwar has influenced the Indian Theatre for more than three decades. He has experimented with many forms of dramatic expression, ranging from the realistic to symbolic expressionist to absurd theatre. Elkunchwar captures a society in transition like Chekhov. He is fascinated by rural feudal values and urban aspirations.

Like Mohan Rakesh in Hindi and Badal Sarkar in Bengoli. Elkunchwar has transcended the limits imposed on him by the confines and milieu of his language and geography. The rich tradition of translations and interpretations within Indian languages made his plays go further.

Analysis

Elkunchwar is a self conscious modernist. He is a strong votary of Urban Marathi Theatre. Elkunchwar came into picture when bold experiments were becoming popular. Many plays like Dharamvir Bharti’s, “Andha

Yug”, Mohan Rakesh’s “Ashad Ka Ek Din”, and “Aadhe Ahure” continued to push the boundaries of Hindi Theatre. It was the time when Vijay Tendulkar’s Plays were presenting the Marathi Middle Class and its hypocrisies realistically. Elkunchwar’s plays spoke against the middle class ennui in dealing with its own hypocrisies. Elkunchwar did not use violence like Tendulkar. Elkunchwar plays have gained national and international critical attention, and his growing body of work has become part of India’s post colonial theatrical canon.

Mahesh Elkunchwar became interested in writing for theatre after he got chance to see Vijay Tendulkar’s *mijinkalo mi haralo* i.e. I won, I lost in 1965. The prestigious literary magazine *Satyakatha* published his first one act play *Sultan* in 1967. Vijaya Mehta directed both “Sultan” and “Holi.” His plays reveal a preoccupation with death, loneliness, creativity, the illusion of wealth, and the apparent purposelessness of choice or action while the ultimate goal of life remains unknown. With the exception of “Holi” and “Raktapushp” i.e flower of blood, they use symbols schematically and are composed in an expressionistic mode. This is also true of Elkunchwar’s full length dramas, “Rudrarvarsha” i.e. angry rain in 1968, “Garbo” in 1973, and “Vasankand” i.e. period of desire in 1974. Much later in the philosophical comedy “Pratibimb” i.e. reflection in 1987 the symbols acquire a life beyond the schema. The play “Party” in 1976 was followed by a fallow period, during which time Elkunchwar acted in Govind Nihalani first film “Akrosh” i.e. cry of the wounded in 1980. He also adapted the scenarios for Ketan Mehta “Holi” in 1983 and Nihalani “Party” in 1984 from his own plays.

His famous play “The Old Mansion” deal with a whole age. It shows gently the slow decline in the fortunes of a traditional Hindu family. The family comes to terms with the demands of the modernity. There is a sense of inevitability and lethargy. There is a resistance to change. The play is set in the old decaying mansion of the Deshpande. They are a landed Brahmin family. The family is loosing its power and status. This is because of the newly institutional land reforms. The cooks who worked for Deshpande migrate to Bombay in search of job. Other lower cast group brew liquor or work in newly set up restaurant in the villages. The play was inspired by Anton Chekhov’s play “The Cherry Orchard” that describes the socio economic transformation in early 20th Century Russia.

The Tractor in the play is a symbol of the hollow prestige of the Deshpande family. It is no longer an economic investment in a village with small land holdings and hardly any electricity. Bhaskar is the eldest son. He refused to accept that they are now no longer rich as they were in the past. They are indebted to the vegetable seller who has started his own business. He wants to buy the orchard if they cannot repay the debts. Bhaskar wants an extravagant funeral for his father. Power over the household is transferred from mother-in-law to Bhaskar’s wife who is the eldest daughter-in-law.

Elkunchwar’s plays are not autobiographical. They reflect the loneliness he faced as a college students. Most of Elkunchwar plays are dominated by darkness. It occupies the psyche and the future of the character.

Elkunchwar can probe the human mind. He can shift through thought process and emotion. He creates a tapestry of interlinked situation.

The play "Sonata" can be analysed from various perspective. There are three female characters in the play. The action takes place in a drawing room. The girlfriends share their innermost thought. They often hurt each other knowingly or unknowingly. All three are different in nature. One is a prudent matured Maharashtraian. The other is food loving Bengoli. The third is a free spirit with quite an appetite for men. These women are not at peace with themselves.

The play opens with two female characters talking to each other. They belong to two different communities. They are in contrast with each other as far as attitude and perspective is concerned. The entire play takes place within the four walls of a house. The characters live there. The characters are free they are outrageous. However, they are lonely. Their dream, hopes, sorrow and joy all survive within these four walls. Post independent urbanization has made it difficult for the characters to view sky from the windows. Dolan drinks and smokes. It shows the degradation of modern urban life.

The play "Holi" is story about college students living in a hostel. The play opens with a simple agitation of these students for the demands of holiday on the surface level it is the story of college students. However, at deeper level it deals with basic human nature- human to human relationship in the post modern world.

In the play "Party" an evening party organized by Damyante for the success of Bhave. However, she expresses her dislike for such parties. The play present the visionless parties of the urban middle class, Consumerism has colonized the mind of the individual in the modern society. Love and married alliances among characters show clearly the impact of consumerism. All the people are lost in their financial success without any attention towards the socio cultural reality of the nation.

In the play "Garbo" the audience observe how the dramatist portrays the alienation and isolation of urban life in Bombay, from the perspective of three male characters. Shrimant is a wealthy business man. Intuc is a professor. Pansy is an adolescent. They are all struggling. They experience the sterility of their lives. Garbo is a sex- machine for Shrimant. She is mother figure for Pansy and an aesthetic ideal for Intuc, All the men in this play seek redemption and hope through their imagination of Garbo. Garbo has a self contempt as a B grade actress. She has sexual affairs with many men. The body seems to be the only reality. The sexual act seems to be only way of potentially attaining identity and recognition.

In "Atmakatha" (Autobiography) Raja is an eminent writer who is in the process of completing his autobiography. The authenticity of it is under question. His autobiography functions as an artificial mask. He wants to hide controversies of his private life. This is clearly visible in his relationship with woman. Raju is married to Uttara. He is involved in an extra martial relationship with his sister Vasanti. Raju is betrayed by

both the women. Raju is of the view that to become a successful fiction writer it is not possible to mention every element of truth. The multi layered features of every character is revealed through their dialogues.

The play has been created from a psycho-realistic point of view. On the surface level it appears to be a family play. There are three characters who are involved in the complexities and confusions of post-modern human existence. Every individual lives in a world that is false. The original and virtual have merged with each other. It is very difficult to find the difference as multiple forms of truth and reality exists. Post modernism celebrates this ambiguity. The playwright through multiple questioning highlights this very dilemma of post modern survival. The play illustrates the fact that truth has no everlasting permanence. It is a construct that is individual in nature. It depends on specific moment and situation.

Conclusion

To sum up, Mahesh Elkunchwar writes about the real life situation of Indian society-a society which poses to be Indian by heart and soul and desires to be slave of Western Culture. All his plays are about the different social concerns. His plays exemplify the artistic blend of Indian and Western Cultures and concerns.

References

1. Manesh Elkunchwar, *Atmakatha* (Autobiography, trans. Pratima Kulkarni) (Calcutta:Segauli Books, 1989)
2. *Collected Plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar 1* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).
3. *Collected Plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar 2* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009)
4. Fringe takes centre stage. The importance of being Mahesh Elkunchwar and Satish Alekar in Marathi theatre Mint. 6 February 2009. Retrieved March 2012.
5. Mahesh Elkunchwar: Where Silence Speaks More Than Words (swaarajyamag.com).