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Expressionism in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion***Shrikant Niranjana Puri**

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Abstract

The end of the twentieth century has seen drastic changes in the socio-economic condition of the villagers in India. This is the time when modernism was slowly entering into the lives of the villagers. Many people were crazy to accept the new lifestyle. However, there were some feudal families who were lingering between the modern and the old lifestyles. They wanted to follow the old traditions and rituals; at the same time, they saw their neighbours improving their lifestyle by following modern ways. They believed in the eighteenth century aristocratic values. They wished that the people should work for them without any expectation. Without doing any work and selling their property for the luxurious life made them poor. It was also the age of urbanization, materialism and capitalism. Under this circumstances and dilemma, the living becomes uneasy. This explores the psychological condition of the characters in the play written at this time.

Mahesh Elkunchwar is a postmodern Indian playwright, so many modern theatrical experiments are found in his plays. The present play, *Old Stone Mansion* by Mahesh Elkunchwar, reflects the psyche of the characters trapped in the dilemma between modernity and orthodoxy, aristocracy and democracy, urbanization and village life, materialism and spiritualism, and capitalism and feudalism. Naturalism is naturally seen in the play. For this he employed expressionism in his play.

Old Stone Mansion is the translation of Mahesh Elkunchwar's first part (*Wada Chirebandi*) of Marathi trilogy *Yugant*.

Keywords:

Expressionism, symbolism, psyche, naturalism, modernity, orthodoxy

Psychological expression

Expressionism is the psychological representation of the characters, especially the central characters. For this the characters are explored in a particular and special situation. The situation in the play is the days and rituals after the death of Tatyaji, the father of Bhaskar and other major characters in the play. The behaviour of the major characters in this particular situation is focused up on. All the major characters are together for the thirteen-day ceremony of the dead. It is already fifth day when the play begins and everybody is waiting for the arrival of Bhaskar's brother, Sudhir and Sudhir's wife Anjali. They come late night. But since their arrival they have hidden conflict. Everybody expresses their desires in isolation. Nobody speaks to others what they really think. They think exactly opposite of what they speak. This conflict becomes overt when they need more money for the 'Shradh' ritual. Finally, the issue is resolved by selling the land of Aai, mother of Bhaskar. There is one more conflict for the share in the family gold and the property. This conflict is not resolved, but stopped with the stealing of gold and flight of Ranju, daughter of Bhaskar, with the so called English teacher.

The play has naturalism as it focuses more on the mental or psychological state of the characters. It is a literary movement against realism. It also reflects the on-going changes in the society so minutely.

The emphasis is laid on the internal and mental state of the characters, and not on the outer world. For this dialogues in silence, monologues, mysterious event and telepathic communication are explored. Bhaskar and his wife express their secret feelings about the family jewellery and sharing the properties among the siblings when they are all alone. The experience at the time of wearing jewellery expresses her feelings (Elkunchwar, 2010: 185, 188). Sudhir and his wife also express secret desires in isolation. They also want their share in the jewellery and property. Prabha, sister of Bhaskar, also expresses her unexpressed feelings about her higher education and marriage to her mother. The lengthy dialogues (like monologue) of Parag and Abhay (in Marathi version) express their inner thoughts and feelings. A mysterious event with Dadi, grandmother of Bhaskar, signals the expressionism. She was carried out to the tractor in the yard. But nobody knows who and how carried her there. She was crying the name of her son, Tatyaji. It was her desire to be served by her own son. In the play there is telepathic conversation between some characters. Sometimes the communication between Bhaskar's Mother, Aai and Bhaskar's brother, Chandu becomes telepathic, especially in the part III (*Yugant*) of Marathi version. First, she hears the ringing of bells of the temple where Chandu performs *pooja*. Then, she listens to the permission sought by Chandu to go to a divine lake. Aai also gives permission telepathically to go to the lake. (Elkunchwar, 1997: 112) Finally, Chandu senses the death of Aai who died early morning. (Elkunchwar, 1997: 125)

Symbolism

Symbols were not common and deliberately used in the early literature. But in the modern literature they are employed deliberately in a large scale. It also plays a significant role in expressionism. Many significant symbols are found in *Old Stone Mansion*. 'The Mansion' in the title itself is used symbolically. It is the symbol of aristocracy. Up to the nineteenth century, the houses of the landlord or aristocrat were large and built with old stones. They were also multi-storey. They were costly. However, the mansion shown in the play is in broken condition without electricity connection (Elkunchwar, 2010: 163). It needs repairs. The whole scene indicates the poverty of the family. It is the symbol of the lost glory and prosperity of the Deshpandes.

In the 1990s (the time when the play was written), tractor is the symbol of richness. Very few landlords could afford it. It means that the Dharangaonkar Deshpandes were very rich in the early 1990s. However, the tractor mentioned (off stage) in the play is not working. It has been out of order for many years. It is as useless as a white elephant in yard. The condition of the Deshpandes is just like the tractor. Both the tractor and the family are the symbols of glory, but both are in the wretched condition. Tractor, the symbol of richness turns into 'a real pest' and 'should be thrown out' (Elkunchwar, 2010: 158). In fact, the tractor in front of the mansion gives an idea of the condition of the people in the mansion to the guests.

Gold (jewellery) means accumulation of wealth and symbol of richness. The Deshpandes had plenty of it. It was accumulated and preserved from generation to

generation. For Dadi, Aai and Vahini, it is more than metal. It brings the blessings and invisible presence of all the previous ladies of the Deshpande family. Aai and Vahini express:

How old those ornaments are! They belonged to great grandmother-in-law and grandmother-in-law. The Deshpande sold their lands, but never touched the women's gold. Lakshmi wasn't ever taken out into the market. ...gold is not just money. One generation passed it on to the next and that one to the one after. So it goes - our link with our ancestors. When you put on the ornament, you think of all the hands and necks they have touched! You sense all the Deshpande women standing around you, gazing upon you admiring. When I first entered this house, how radiant Dadibai looked in those ornaments, how resplendent. She named each one and told me its history – who had made it and when (Elkunchwar, 2010: 185, 188)

Granny / Dadi is the representative of last generation. She is deaf and unaware of the present condition. It means she is neutral to the current happenings in the family. The wretched condition of the family is beyond the control of this generation. She is the constant reminder of the time. The time that of glory has passed with her youth. Her decay symbolises the decay of the prosperity of the Dharangaonkar Deshpandes.

The telepathic voices heard by Dadi, Aai and Chandu (in Marathi version) are symbolic. They are things that the characters could feel but never express in reality. They are inner psychological feelings expressed overtly. (Elkunchwar, 2010: 188) (Elkunchwar, 1997: 68,112)

Stars and lake (especially in the second part of Marathi version) are the symbols of Nature. Abhay and Parag, the young ones, watch the reflection of stars in the lake. There they forget their worries and feel the happiness. This is off stage objects only mentioned in the dialogues.

Irrigated land / 'mala' also plays a great symbolic role. It suggests abundance of grains, consequently wealth. The crops will ripen well. It is an assurance that its owner will not starve. None of the scenes is set here, but the Deshpandes always talk of it. It is discussed more in the Marathi version. Overtly, the Deshpandes say that they will mortgage it to get some money for the thirteenth day ceremony. But nobody actually wants to do so.

Another symbol used in the play is *Shradhh*, rituals of thirteenth day of the dead. It is the symbol of superstition and false prestige as well. The Deshpandes want to perform this last rite in a very grand manner. Actually, it is useless to spend lot of money after the death of a person for his last rites, instead of spending it on the same person for his medical treatment when he was alive. Bhaskar and Aai both want to feed four or five thousand people. "Five thousand plates means at least twenty-five thousand rupees." But Bhaskar's wife thinks, "This is the last expenditure for a family elder. Do we refuse it and get closer to hell?" (Elkunchwar, 2010: 168)

Dreams and Reality

Expressionism also works through dreams. The characters in the play have many dreams to achieve. However, in reality, they are very far from their reach. Some of them die with their unfulfilled dreams in their hearts. Aai dreams of her children well settled. But in reality, every child has his/her own problems.

The honorary title 'Deshpande' is the sign of richness. So the Deshpandes do everything to make a show of richness. They do not work in the farm themselves. They do

not cook for themselves. For each work they have servants. The only work that they do is to loaf in the mansion or in the *mala*. Bhaskar says, "We tilled our fields lounging on swings; we lost whole estates, while we chewed paan.... Out went the jet of tobacco juice straight into the corner of the room." (Elkunchwar, 2010: 156,157) They sell everything from their house 'by back door' (Elkunchwar, 2010: 165) to run their house and maintain their reputation in the society. But in reality, they are very poor. Now they do not have anything to sell to perform the last rites of their dead father. They have lost their credit in the society. The servants left them and went to the persons who gave them good salary. So they sell the back part of the mansion to a 'shawkar' / financier. They do not sell the mansion because it is the icon of their reputation.

Prabha, the spinster in the family, wanted to take higher education and become an officer or doctor. But she could not leave her village due to the family and social bondages. She says, "I got a first in my matriculation. Twenty years ago. I wanted to be a doctor. But the Deshpande girls weren't supposed to live anywhere by themselves to study. All for their family prestige and honour – never mind if our lives were reduced to dust." (Elkunchwar, 2010: 166) So her wish to go to Amarawati for higher education to become an officer remained unfulfilled. In Marathi version she dies alone in a traumatic condition.

Chandu, another bachelor and younger brother of Bhaskar, is of the age of getting married. He is the youngest Deshpande, a family of landlords. He dreams to marry and live a life of a 'real' Deshpande. His dialogues with her mother makes it clear. But his condition in the family is not better than a man-servant. (Elkunchwar, 2010: 148) In reality, his dream raised. In Marathi version he leaves home and accepts renunciation. However, he could not get rid of the physical desire.

Parag, the son of Bhaskar, dreams to go to Mumbai. But practically this dream also raised. He never gets a chance to go to Mumbai with his uncle, Sudhir.

Ranju, the daughter of Bhaskar, dreams of passing the examination of tenth class. She lives in dreams. She also likes to live like a heroine in a movie. However, she could never pass the tenth examination. Her life was spoiled by the so called English teacher, who used to come to her house for tuitions. They elope to Mumbai with the family gold that Ranju steals from her house. Later on the teacher abandons her in a lodge and runs away with the gold.

Bhaskar and his wife dream of seizing family gold. They plan to hide the gold and tell the family that the gold was sold by Tatyaji or stolen by a thief. (Elkunchwar, 2010: 187) They also dream to live like the real ancestral Deshpande with all their reputation and pompous ways of living. They think that their commands should be followed by the family members and the villagers. However, even after trying hard, they could not control the family and the villagers for long. The gold is also stolen and then lost by Ranju.

The brother of Bhaskar, Sudhir and Sudhir's wife Anjali dream of having a spacious flat / house in Mumbai. They also want their son, Abhay, to become a doctor and settle down in Mumbai. (Elkunchwar, 2010: 150, 151, 165) They sometimes also wish to come and settle in their native village. But in Marathi version of the play, Abhay wants to live in America. Sudhir and Anjali want their share in the family gold. But Ranju stole and lose the gold in Mumbai. They do not get many family things which are legally theirs.

Every major character in the play has one or more dreams that they want to fulfil. But they could not fulfil them.

Setting

Night is prevailing throughout the play. It is the symbol of gloominess of the Deshpande's fortune. The opening scene and many of the important scenes take place at night. Moreover, night helps to express the exact desires of the characters for the gold, the land, the property and the mutual relations.

Consciousness of time

Vyanktesh/ Tatyaji is dead before the play begins. However, he is alive for Dadi. She also reminds time to the audience and the characters. The total span of the action is of eight days (20 years in Marathi version, that too only three incidents at three different times). The dialogues of the characters also make the audience aware of the passing of time. Dadi constantly asks, "Vyankatesh ... Arrey Vyankatesh! Where has he gone bappa? ... What time is it? Time moves so slowly, the pest." (Elkunchwar, 2010: 134) Similar dialogues by Dadi are scattered in the Act I of the play.

Few Characters

The expressionist play has few characters, since the focus is on the psychological reflections of the characters and not on the society. The present play has only seven major characters. The emphasis is on fewer characters in each of the Acts.

Less Acts

The expressionist play has few Acts or scenes, since the play revolves around the one central event. The present play has only two Acts (three parts in Marathi version). Each Act is divided into fewer scenes.

Malapropism

Malapropism is a term coined for the selection of wrong or inappropriate or similar sounding words in conversation. The fine example of malapropism from the present play is the character named Vahini, wife of Bhaskar. She is crazy for using English words, but she does not know the correct word or appropriate form of the word. While talking about the absence of a cook in the house, she says, "Not to have a cook is such a *handicraft*". (Elkunchwar, 2010: 144) Here she actually wanted to say 'handicap', but unconsciously she says 'handicraft'. More such examples are available in Marathi version of the play. The word *Mechanical* is wrongly used instead of *mechanic* (Elkunchwar, 1997:10), *shot* instead of *shock* (Elkunchwar, 1997: 7), *nervousnesspana* instead of *nervousness* (Elkunchwar, 1997: 7), *nonsensepana* instead of *nonsense* (Elkunchwar, 1997: 25) and so on.

Conclusion

Mahesh "Elkunchwar experimented with several forms of dramatic expressions ranging from realistic to symbolic and expressionist to absurd theatre." (Bhandare and Bhanegaonkar, 402: 2014). The dialogues in the play reveals the psyche of the characters. The struggle for the accepting and rejecting the values of modernity and orthodoxy, aristocracy and democracy, urbanization and village life, materialism and spiritualism, morality and immorality, and capitalism, and feudalism occupy the large space in the play. These things to explore the employment of expressionism in the play.

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