

An Evaluation in the Tradition of Problem Play in Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the themes of unfulfilled dreams and conflicts within the family. This paper portrays the struggles of the protagonist Savitri, she is a working mother, who faces financial instability and personal dissatisfaction, while each family member deals with their own identity crises. The play highlights the breakdown of marriage and the search for meaning in a patriarchal and traditional societal structure. The play presents the conflict, confrontation, powerlessness to attach, converse, and find real pleasure. This play also discusses about the man-woman relationship but it also depicts the breakdown of the family.

Keywords: problem play, relationship, communication, conflicts, freedom and justice

INTRODUCTION

The rise and growth of the problem play in England are closely linked with the disintegration of middle-class life and values. The conflict between Victorian orthodoxy and the new ideas and ways of life during the period under review furnished interesting material to the dramatists for dramatic treatment. The problem play became a powerful and effective medium of social criticism, and generally vindicated the right of the individual to shape his life and destiny unfettered by the prejudices and conventions of society. It dramatized the conflict of ideas and social attitudes, and upheld the principles of equality, freedom and justice. The problem play was a new experiment in form and technique, and dispensed with the conventional devices and expedients of the theatre.

Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, George Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville Barker, John Galsworthy, Stanley Houghton and many others ventured to depart from the beaten track. In the beginning their work aroused bitter controversies and was greeted with contempt and division. The problem play was highly disturbing to all those who frequented the theatres merely to escape boredom to digest a good dinner or to exchange solid realities for a world of empty dreams. The theatre managers judged the merits of the early works of Shaw, Galsworthy, Pinero and Jones, according to Box-office receipts. It was realized that problem drama could not be a sound business venture, and therefore, remained a theatrical out-cast during the nineties. It had to depend on the patronage and enthusiasm of a small coterie of enlightened play-goers.

The problem playwright was concerned with the seamy side of life and dealt with unpleasant themes and motives. He defied the dictates of Victorian prudery and convention, and struck at the very roots of the existing social and domestic life. The production of *Ghosts* at the Royalty Theatre in 1891 raised a storm of controversy and Ibsen was severely condemned for dealing with the most sordid and loathsome aspects of human experience. The play was described as a mass of vulgarity and egotism, coarseness and absurdity. He was accused of moral perversity and his characters were described as rebels against nature and society.

Galsworthy, Granville Barker and Harkin wrote a series of plays, wherein they depicted men and women deliberately flouting the dictates of conventional morality, without the slightest compunction. These were naturally offensive to pious and respectable folk.

The problem play ventured to deal with 'painful subjects' and therefore suffered on account of the 'neo-puritan attitude of the average playgoer and the British Censor. It was considered morally pernicious and unwholesome and its performance in the public theatre was often banned. Boas wrote that "throughout these plays we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome" (F. S. Boas, 244)

The problem playwright freely airs his ideas and opinions on serious subjects. He introduces long speeches and discussions in his work, and sometimes trumpets his beliefs in elaborate prefaces or treatises. Problem drama is supposed to deal with

moral or social problem in the abstract, without reference to the idiosyncrasies of human nature and critical attention has been directed almost exclusively to the writer's philosophy on criticism of life. Hence, we are often told that the problem play is not a play at all but document a homely in dialogue', a pamphlet or sociological treatise.

The use of drama as a vehicle of social criticism was contrary to the accepted traditions of the 19th Century theatre, and the playwright who assumed the role of a preacher or aimed at instructing humanity could not be regarded as dramatist at all. "Rabindranath Tagore was a pioneering modern playwright who wrote plays noted for their exploration and questioning of nationalism, identity, and spiritualism and material greed. His plays are written in Bengali and include *Chitra* (Chitrangada, 1892), *The King of the Dark Chamber* (Raja, 1910), *The Post Office* (Dakghar, 1913), and *Red Oleander* (Raktakarabi, 1924)" (Banham 1998, 1051)

Problem drama, it is often urged, lacks abiding interest and has a purely local or topical significance. It is based on the shifting sands of convention and morality and raises issues that are not independent of time and place, problem drama departed from the accepted methods and principles of dramatic construction and was, therefore, dismissed as crude and undramatic. The allegations made against the content and forms of the problem drama have often prevented a sober consideration of its merits and possibilities. The name of the problem play was coined by Sydney Grundy who used it in a disparaging sense for the intellectual drama of the nineties, which he believed was marching to its doom' in the hands of 'a coterie of enthusiastic eccentrics. It has no precise connotation, and the uncertainty that surrounds literary nomenclature, is very well illustrated by the varying interpretations given to this form of drama.

Problem drama is supposed to deal with problems and Shaw defines it as "the presentation in parable of the conflict between man's will and his environment". Tagore held that the discussion of social problems, which Shaw regarded as an important peculiarity of modern art, was a bane of modern poetry and drama. He did not regard the so-called problem play as drama and felt that the intrusion of social and economic problems in the realm of literature was nothing but unlawful trespass. The problem play is supposed to have arisen out of the sentimental drama of the Eighteenth century. It is regarded as a bastard form of dramatic composition. Such drama has assumed the grab of rollicking comedy as well as poignant tragedy. The expression 'problem-drama' has also been used for certain works of Shakespeare e.g. *All well that Ends well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and cressida*, and *Hamlet*.

Problem Drama has often been the victim of popular prejudice and perverse judgment. It has been regarded as essentially crude and inartistic. Nothing has been more certain than the uncertainty of critical opinion regarding the form, content and appeal of this type of drama. However, in India the scene is different. "The 'problem' is not, after all, the redemption of a betrayed maiden's tarnished honour, but the readiness of her respectable elders to determine a young woman's future for her without regard to her rights including here her right to erotic holiday enjoyment" (Chris Baldick, 116).

Modern Indian theatre emerged under British influence in three cities that were founded by the British namely Kolkata in the east, Mumbai in the west and Chennai in the south. Naturally theatre in these cities followed the British legacy. Modern Indian drama reveals two main tendencies, both natural to a historical development.

One is, Indian playwrights have gone back to tradition for their themes and techniques and the other is making use of what are considered modern trends in the theatre. These two tendencies are specially seen in 1960's and 1970's. However modern, Indian dramas in Hindi, or in regional languages or even in English till date are predominantly problem plays. They deal with either individual problems or socio-political, economic problems of the day. Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, Badal Sircar In Bengali Girish Karnad in Kannada and in English- Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabham and Asif Currimbhoy in English are clearly the recognized voices of the contemporary Indian dramatic scene.

While Mohan Rakesh uses historical characters to project the breakdown of communication of marriage and the age of old relationships, Badal Sircar uses contemporary situations and social problems to project the life-in-death attitude of modern life. The central theme of many of his early plays like *Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas*, *Sheish Nei (There is No End)* is a sense of meaninglessness in our existence owing to socio-political and psychological problems.

It breeds a kind of 'metaphysical anguish. The horror of Hiroshima has gripped Sircar in *Baki Itihas (The Other Side of History)* and *Sheish Nei (There is No End)*. While Badal Sircar makes the society, especially the middle class, feel guilty for being indifferent to man and his problems, Vijay Tendulkar, the *avantgarde* Marathi playwright harps upon the theme of isolation of the individual and his confrontation with the hostile surroundings in his plays *Shantata Court Chaloo Aahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)*, *Giddh (Vultures)* *Sakharam Binder* and Ghasiram Kotwal Sex and violence form an important part of them and are considered as the representative plays of the Marathi theatre of cruelty. They also show his

probing spirit in exploring modern man's anguish. Like Artaud he relates the theme of anguish to the theme of violence. While receiving a fellowship from Nehru Memorial Fund Committee he elaborated the theory of violence and said that the occurrence of violence was not loathsome or ugly as it was innate in human nature.

Unlike Badal Sircar and Tendulkar, who delved into the problems of the middle class man, Girish Karnad went back to Indian myths and history to find parables for the contemporary problems. For example the historical character Tughlaq serves to depict the post-independence Indian politics. Similarly the story of king *Yayati* from the Mahabharata is used in his play *Yayati* (1961) to articulate moral degeneration and to explode the myth that wisdom comes with age. King Yayati for pursuing sensual pleasure was cursed to old age in the prime of his life. So he approached his son, Puru with a request to exchange his youth for old age. The son accepted it and became older than his father. But the old age brought no knowledge, no self-realization, only the senselessness of a punishment meted out for an act in which he had not participated. Similar is the case with his other plays *Naga-Mandala*, *Hayavadana* and *Tale-Danda*. Like Karnad, Dharamvir Bharati also uses the war story of the Mahabharata in his play *Andha Yug (The Blind Age)* to articulate the sense of horror and despair felt in India in the wake of the partition of the country and the communal blood-shed that accompanied it.

Mohan Rakesh used historical characters and their stories namely Kalidasa, Mallika and the state of Ujjain in *Asadh Ka Ek Din*, Nanda and Buddha in *Lahron Ke Rajhans* to explore disintegration, communication gap and breaking bonds of relationships in the modern age. He finds in them a forceful tool to express modern man's anguish, anger, frustration and despair leading him to search for individual existence. These stories help him to question the viability of the relationship and marriage as a social institution. "Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe-Adhure* is one of the most significant plays about urban-middle class family and poignantly projects the transition of values in the changing urban scenario in India" (Saraswat, Surbhi, 2014)

In all his plays we find the failure of marriage more so in urban middle class family. It also hints at cultural onslaught on Indian life that leads to such a pass as depicted in *Halfway House*. Dharwadker and Bhargava remarked: "Adhe Adhure as a drama of urban dysfunction which combines realism with several structural innovations to accommodate the psychodrama of home and family, the privileged narrative of realism in modern western theatre, to the Indian metropolis" (Dharwadker and Bhargava 139).

In *Halfway House* the same concern is expressed but in a direct way through contemporary motifs and through the language of everyday speech. Tin cutter, broken furniture, dusty, old, moth-eaten books for example are used as motifs and they create the background of the play and set the tone of the play. That the house is half and all those living in it are 'half', incomplete are clearly suggested through Savitri-Mahendranath family can be any family of urban middle class society beaten by the bug of middle class anxiety and moralities. Savitri takes up a job when her husband is rendered jobless and so she presents the aspirations and desires of newly working woman looking for greater freedom and pursuing some elusive goal in life. Consequently she faces the problem a working woman faces in her day to day life-suspicious eyes of the family members, male prejudice, jealousy and above all illicit intention of her male boss. Likewise the woman is suspected by her husband, son, daughter, neighbours, husband's friends and also by readers. Though there is no candid portrayal of her sexual relationship with anyone. It also points to communication gap that operates at all levels - between Savitri and Mahendranath, Savitri and Ashok, Kinni and her parents, Binni and her husband. Their talks often degenerate into drab monologues without any head or tail and always meet dead ends:

“THE WOMAN: so what...

BOY So what, What?

THE WOMAN: So, what do you want to do?

THE BOY: About what?

THE WOMAN: About yourself.

THE BOY What's wrong?

THE WOMAN: Do you want to work or do you want, like your father, to...

THE BOY: Why must you always drag him into...?

THE WOMAN: When I sent you to college, you quit halfway I got you a job with Air Freeze... you left within six weeks. Now that I'm trying to arrange something else

for, you... THE BOY: But why are you trying? Have I told you to try?

THE OLDER GIRL. So, you mean... you don't want to do anything, ever?

THE BOY: Have I said so?

THE OLDER GIRL Then what do you want to do, if you don't want a job?

THE BOY: That I don't say. All I can say is that if I'm not really interested in something 1...

THE WOMAN: You're only interested in

THE OLDER GIRL: Wait, Mama

THE WOMAN: You wait, let me speak (to THE BOY) You're only interested in three things... in sleeping all day, in cutting out those pictures and... in taking things from home and...

THE BOY: Do you call this a home? THE WOMAN: What would you call it?

THE BOY: I'd call it..." (*Halfway House* 29-30)

It seems as if everyone is at each other's throat, nagging, humiliating and quarreling. There is no attempt at reconciliation and neither any decisive step to start a new life independently. They all need some hangovers. So they make half-hearted attempt to get rid of the 'hell' that their home is. Their house is the quarreling place. They all dataset it, curse it, and are aggrieved of it; and they all want release but they find no alternative, no release from it. They are as it was, destined to stew in their own juice. They find no escape and go on leading life in suffocation, utter helplessness and inner conflict. Diana Dimitrova commented: "Though the woman is at the centre of the play and we sympathize with her throughout, there is a shift towards the man's point of view at the end of the drama. The playwright makes us believe that it is the woman's aspirations for the new, the different and the inaccessible that accounts for the problems" (Dimitrova, Diana. 387)

The 'home' has psychological connotations. It stands for a source of solace and moral stay to the individual in moments of crisis. It is as sanctified as a temple in our tradition. In the modern time we are losing all that. The joint family system is fast becoming a matter of the past and the individual family in the emerging society increasingly tends to be a house divided rather than a house. R.L Nigam rightly comments:

"Whether it is Mahendranath turning to Juneja, or it is Savitri turning to one or other of her admired ones, it is the selfsame phenomenon the soul's search for a sanctuary. These sources, who ever or whatever they may be, are bound to be dearer to the individual concerned than anything or anybody in the family. The situation can only add to the existing tensions which will make the need for a sanctuary all the more imperious. The vicious circle runs on. At certain levels, the level particularly to which *Andhe Adhure* belongs, the situation of crisis originates from and is made more vicious by the breakdown of marriage" (Nigam 86)

CONCLUSION

Thus we find that in *Halfway House* the agony of a particular family is transmuted into a common experience of middle class urban family of today. The problem plays in India have come to be accepted and recognized. *Halfway House* depicts the poverty of a single-unit family in an urban location. It is about a middle-aged father Mahendranath, who is a failed entrepreneur. They have been admired by the critics and the play-goers. The story is placed in post-independence India and follows Savitri, a middle-aged woman who is displeased with her life and relationships.

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