



Half way house a representative of post-colonial challenges in India

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Abstract

The independence of India left its citizen with numerous socio-economic challenges to tackle with. From villages to towns life had been full of challenges, economy was not in a position to meet the demands of the citizens and starvation was at its peak. The family structure was at the verge of collapsing. The system of joint family was getting replaced by small and nuclear families. The concept of women working outside their traditional domain had no place in the typical patriarchal society. Newly formed government did not had any concrete solution to these problems. Since the writers and the artists have been a mirror of the society they captured these challenges and portray them in their writings. In this paper we are going to discuss an iconoclastic work of Hindi drama Adhe Adhure by Mohan Rakesh. The present study is primarily based on the translated version of this work HalfWay House. This play characterises the challenges and the problems of a middle class family in newly independent India. Through this paper an attempt has been made to delve deep into the issues and challenges in the postcolonial society of India. These structural changes in the middle class society is highlighted by the play which further paved the way for numerous successors by setting new trends in writing. Moreover, it also addresses the stereotypes by breaking the boundaries set for the women of the society. The paper also highlights the absurdity of over ambitiousness and modernity.

Keywords: challenges, family, absurdity, modernity, patriarchy

Introduction

The process of colonialism dates back to the emergence of human race on earth, one ruler used to invade another's territory to settle himself and this process continued for centuries. But the European colonization in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was entirely different from the earlier one. They were not only concerned to replace the rulers but also to exploit the natives, colonise their minds and alter their culture by declaring them as uncivilized and outdated. Pramod K. Nayyar in his book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* designates that "Colonialism is not only political control of European but also the distortion of culture and modification of knowledge and its destruction and disciplined. It is done by making translations, commentaries and academic studies (6)." A renowned name in Postcolonial studies is of Ania Loomba in her book *Colonialism and Post-colonialism* she writes "Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history (7)." India became colony of Britain in eighteenth century A.D. and finally got independence in 20th century on 15th August 1947 after a long history of struggle and sacrifices. This colonial period of two centuries has impacted Indians from all angles. Politically and geographically country got divided into two nations on the basis of religion. Communal riots of 1947 in the eastern and northern part of India wounded the country to its core whose repercussions are felt till this date. Bipin Chandra, a well-known historian while discussing the consequences which emerged after Independence of India in his book *India Since Independence* stated:

India was in the midst of a communal holocaust. There was senseless communal slaughter and a fratricidal war of unprecedented proportions. Unspeakable atrocities were perpetrated on the minorities in both India and Pakistan. In the span of a few months, nearly 500,000 people were killed and property worth thousands of millions of rupees was looted and destroyed. Communal violence threatened the very fabric of society. Even in Delhi, under the very nose of the central government, the looting and killing of Muslims lasted several days. (83)

The immediate problem that experienced after partition was the influx of millions of refugees from the newly created nation. Government was limited by the resources at its disposal to compensate six million homeless migrants who had lost everything of their own. But the efforts for the rehabilitation could not show significant results as the exodus of Hindus from East Bengal continued for years. Bipin. Chandra further, remarked: "Nearly all the Hindus and Sikhs from West Pakistan had migrated in one go in 1947, a large number of Hindus in East Bengal had stayed on there in the initial years of 1947 and 1948. But as communal riots broke out periodically in East Bengal, there was a steady stream of refugees from there year after year till 1971 (85)."

Along with the influx of refugees across the border there has been a constant movement of population from villages to towns. This increasing shift of the people led to many challenges like unemployment, poverty, slums and pollution in already bowed nation. In technical terms it is called urbanization of the

population. Ram Ahuja in his book *Social Problems in India* quotes Anderson who writes "Urbanization is not a one-way process but is a two-way process. It involves not only movement from villages to cities and change from agricultural occupation to business, trade, service and profession, but it also involves change in the migrants' attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviour patterns (245)." India had a history of joint family system used in which several generations lived under one roof. Family as a social institution provides platform to the members to get strong and close to manage socio-political and economic affairs. This race of urbanization and westernization has collapsed this closed social institution. The growing need and the circumstances forced both husband and wife to go out to run the household that established a new trend in society. This was purely a new trend started following the post-independence of country. Similarly, in the field of art and literature a wave came with new subject matter. Although the country achieved political freedom but it lagged far behind in socio-economic independence of its citizens. At this time Hindi Drama contributed a lot to convey the message of social problems among the masses. The tradition of writing historical and anti-British plays has been replaced by the social plays. Diana Dimitrova writes that the tendency of writing social plays in Indian writer was developed from western tradition: "the influence of western drama grew and the social problem play in Hindi thrived. This predominantly social messages of modern Hindi drama was in perfect conformity with the ideology of progressivism, the ideas of Gandhi and Indian National Congress, and the political orientation of the J.L. Nehru government toward the soviet Union and Marxism (365)."

Analysis of the play

The play under study is *HalfWay House* is a translated version of Mohan Rakesh's Hindi drama *Adhe Adhure* written in 1968 and performed in March 1969. The present translation is done by Bindu Batra and it is taken as primary source to continue the process of writing this paper. In this seminal work Mohan Rakesh made urban society as the base to discuss the problems emerged in the post-independence India. It was a challenge for the middle class society to stay united and earn livelihood as material circumstances were constantly going down that led to rupture in the traditional family setup. Aparna Dharwadker in her article "*Mohan Rakesh, Modernism and the Postcolonial present*" writes that "*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 (139).

Further, she quoted Om Shivpuri in the same article who described it as "the first meaningful Hindi play about contemporary life... its characters, situations and psychological states are realistic and believable... it has the capability of grasping the tension of contemporary life (154)." At the very beginning of the play the dramatist questions man-woman relationship and gender roles in a middle class Indian society. The setting of the play is in a contemporary family, not divided in acts, only two long episodes appeared with an interval between them. The place remained unchanged throughout the play. The first scene opens in a house of the unnamed 'man number one' and 'woman'. The play begins with the entry of a man in black suit who later served as the narrator of the play. His first question was

Who am I? Introduces the attention of the dramatist to explore the theme of identity crisis and absurdity prevalent among the people following the independence of the country. He calls himself 'amorphous' and 'undefined' to explain his position and the challenges he was facing to get identity in contemporary society. Further, pessimism and absurdity again can be traced in the comments of the narrator in Prologue when he asserts no matter what the circumstances and consequences are, the search of identity would always be continued as an absurd, undefined and irrational act. "The fact is that there is something of me in each one of you and that is why, whether on or off stage, I have no separate identity." (*HalfWay House*, 5) Further, this notion of identity and meaninglessness can be best understood through the character of the Savitri who look for completeness and motive in her married life. She said "why does one get married? In order to fulfil a need... an inner...void, if you like; to be self-sufficient... complete." (*HalfWay House*, 69) Since her husband was unable to satisfy her inner desires, frustrated Savitri seeks marital happiness out of the marital bond which has been considered as an impious act. Dilip

Kumar Basu sees it as "The desire to look for "completeness" in the "other" may look like Everyman's essential and unresolvable problem, and may vaguely place her in the center of an

Absurdist drama where the search may be considered tragic/ridiculous." (*HalfWay House*, 128) Mahendranath, the husband of Savitri, is also in the search of re-establishing his lost identity by making an attempt of partnership in business with his friend Juneja. He has been confined to the four walls of the house and his position of not earning a penny had degraded his respect in the family. This loss of identity in the family affected his mind and heart badly. He was trying to regain the lost ground but his financial position did not support him. "...silent acceptance, perpetual snubs, constant insults, is all that I deserve after so many years" (*HalfWayHouse*, 26) The loss of control in the family hurt his ego and he does not want to be like "only as a stamp of respectability to be used only when he need arises" (*HalfWay House*, 27) The constant accusation of being indolent in the home by wife brought inferiority complex in his character. In the midst of this emotional and mental crisis Juneja's friendship proved a repository of love, respect, identity and comfort. The character of Mahendranath is the real representation of the problems faced by the middle class in Post-Colonial India. In Post-Colonial period the family institution got a huge set back when the classical joint family structure was divided into nuclear families. Mohan Rakesh also took nuclear family in the play under study to make his argument. Mahendranath and Savitri had a nuclear family and this family structure was also different in the sense that the established gender role in the society are changed here. Mother of the house has took the onus to earn the bread of the house and father spent whole day sitting idle at home. Thus in a typical patriarchal society this act broke the stereotype and the trend was unexpected, shameful and indigestive. Dramatist has made this changed gender role a base to build up his argument and asserts that at the end of the day it became cause of scuffle in the family. Savitri doesn't like the sitting of Mahendranath at home without earning a penny they were always at odd with each other and the entire family was disturbed. Moreover, Mohan Rakesh designated the exasperated and absurd condition of this family where nothing concrete comes out from the planning.

Husband only plans to start a business so that burden of the family can be lowered but nothing proved helpful. The feelings and emotions of the little girl 'Kinni' are also not taken into consideration. She is portrayed as unmannered with no sense of talking to elders.

The parents of others' in the society accused her of indulging their children to talk nonsense. These accusations and unhealthy climate at home made her life disturbed and full of frustration. She finds no meaning in her life. The only boy of the home was 'Ashok' who was irresponsible and ignorant and never paid any heed to the advices of mother. He would rather flee away from home than to find job that can lower the overload of mother, the only bread earner in the family. The elder girl 'Binni' has married early against the wishes of her family. Her marriage was unsuccessful and thus she was not happy with her husband and left him for her parental home.

According to Dharwadker that "*Adhe Adhure* reverses conventional gender roles in a manner that was radical for the India of 1969 and is scarcely less radical in the early twenty-first century. As the cornerstone of the family's economic edifice, Savitri dismantles not only male authority but masculinity itself, becoming the first married woman in major post-independence drama to brush aside the conventional sexual mores. She has both the ability and maturity to talk of choices derived by desire. Indeed, all three women in the play challenge the status quo, the mother by looking for a way out, the older daughter through her strange marriage, and the younger daughter through her adolescent sexuality. The multiplication of male roles does not detract from the focus on women, because in all four roles the man is either emasculated or compromised by his duplicity." (159)

The playwright through the character of the Savitri has depicted the women of the postindependent India. These women are depicted as bold, ambitious and a responsible spirit in such an unstable time. Despite having an insignificant position in the office she managed to invite her boss at home so that her only son could stand on his feet. Her husband also turns out to be a failure, both as a husband as well as a businessman. Finally, she saw her goals and aspirations are going to die and once again she planned to enter into relationship with her old friend. But it also proved an illusion. He too could not fulfill her expectations and she decided to return to her previous life. Moreover, this play was coincidentally written and performed at the time of the third wave of Feminism in India which was concerned with the fair treatment of women at home after marriage, equal job opportunities and a voice against sexual, physical and domestic abuse. Savitri despite courageous, ambitious, hardworking and responsible could not think of her placement at deserving posts. The mechanism of patriarchal society has confined her psychology to such an extent that she believed that all high standard and respectable jobs were meant for males. She seeks qualities in male members around her, be it her son, her husband, her boss, her lover or her son-in-law Manoj. Through above discussed aspects of Savitri's character dramatist would like to bring in notice the life of modern Indian women who are still facing umpteen challenges due to their gender. Diana Dimitrova writes "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."(387)

Conclusion

From the above discussion it may be surmised that *Adhe Adhure* does justice to represent actual circumstances of the Post-Independent Indian society particularly the traditional middle class families. The dramatist through varied thematic concerns gives deep insight to these newly emerged challenges and problems in contemporary society. The skillful portrayal of the characters themselves speak about unbalanced political structure and collapsed economic condition and its effect on society. Although, there are numerous readers who confined this play as familial centric, but an in-depth and proper analysis leads one to the wide range of the issues the playwright would like to convey. The changing gender roles of the contemporary Indian society is beautifully presented through the characters of Savitri and Mahendranath. The breaking of family institution from joint to nuclear can be seen through the family of Savitri. Failed business attempts of the Mahendranath portrays the unfriendly attitude of the government of the time towards small businessman. Unlike today's businessman they had no option of government incentives like loans and other financial packs for people below poverty line. Thus, we can conclude that Mohan Rakesh through this iconoclastic work of art established a new trend in Hindi drama which was not seen earlier. Undoubtedly, it is an innovative play that gave priority to social issues as subject of discussions over colonial discourse.

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