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Halfway house: Mohan Rakesh's search for completeness

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Abstract

Halfway House, or Adhe Adhure in Hindi, is one of the most poignant plays depicting the urban middle-class family. Rakesh brings forth the transition of values in the then society with utmost excellence and shows the changing dynamics between a man and woman's equation. Written in the year 1969, Halfway House talks about how hollow and shallow the existence of the bourgeois class were. Rakesh picks up several traits from the Theatre of Absurd (Ionesco, Brecht, Beckett etc.) and the Theatre of Idea (Camus, Sartre, Shaw etc.) and applies the ideologies in this play. Not only him but other playwrights of this era also used this mechanism to portray the important enquiry about one's existentialism.

The characters in this play follow the same path and remain incomplete until the end. Rakesh draws them as fragmented pieces of their own predicaments, and the women suffer way more than men. The corrosiveness of a crumbling family comes out through its members, and Rakesh makes it happen by using concerns or elements of naturalistic, realistic, absurd and existentialistic. The characters are so life-like that they represent the very basic emotions of human like that of crudity, ugliness, corruption, vulgarity etc. As the audience watch the play, they realise Rakesh's desire and longing for a fresh and new morality. Like many of his other contemporaries, he deals with subjects about sex, love and violence. The frustration and anger playing in the minds of the youth of the post-1960 era come up in many plays. The revolutionary ideas are contradictory to established values and conventional norms. Despite the disappointing tone, Rakesh's love for humanity and commitment to values can be understood in his plays.

Keywords: completeness, theatre of absurd, existentialism, fragmented pieces, crumbling family

Introduction

In Halfway House, the human mind's complexities have been unveiled from its very depth. Rakesh brings out the man and woman's relation on grounds of violence and sensuality rather than in affection and love. He is often hailed as an anti-romantic playwright for not projecting love but sex as a form of perversion and degradation. Through the characters of Mahendranath and Savitri, this play projects two types of notions regarding marriage- the traditional kind where male dominance is natural and expected and the kind where companionship is given priority and both look out for each other's fulfillment. The family comprises of their daughters Binni and Kinni and son Ashok. Though modern in all of its other approaches, this family is completely devoid of values and ethics.

Mahendranath is the head of the house just like any other patriarchal family and considers Savitri as his subordinate. Like the master, he demands Savitri to fulfill his unjust demands and whims without uttering a word. In the opening scene of the play, Savitri is seen as a strong and dominating woman. But through various conversations, it is revealed that Savitri had been tortured in the past by Mahendranath, and there has been no one (except for Juneja, who appears at the end) to rescue Savitri from her despair. Binni's dialogue discloses how mercilessly Mahendranath used to beat Savitri up, and their horrible encounter would make her feel as if she is a 'zoo'.

Role of woman in play

Savitri expects her husband to treat her as an equal, but Mahendranath is far from that. She makes a statement about his

character that he behaves like a coward in front of his friends but starts beating her up after coming back home. But whatever her questions and expectations might be, Mahendranath has this thought of being the Absolute in his mind. He does not think of the woman as an individual existence; he believes that she exists only to serve his purpose. He does not think for once before rebuking and hitting her if she does something to displease him. Physical abuse becomes a part of this couple's daily routine. Typical like any other male who remains dissatisfied with his wife, Mahendranath always accuses Savitri of being the reason for his suffering loss in business. For him, a wife, though well educated she might be, is not a partner but a slave working for him. In fact, Mahendranath's expectations from Savitri increases due to her high qualifications; he often tells her that she, being so educated, should know the right way to serve him. A savage beast comes out of him each time he starts beating Savitri, and this makes Binni refer to her house as a 'zoo'.

For Savitri, a husband means her perfect companion and the one who can fill up the hollowness in her life with his love and care. Just like any other woman, she dreams of having a house where the family members live happily and look after each other's happiness and sorrows. But her marriage makes her come out of this dream as Mahendranath does not treat her like a human. The intense physical torture makes her realise that no one is not born a woman but becomes one due to society's treatment towards her. As she lives with Mahendranath, she also understands that women have only got what the men wanted to give them; they could take nothing of their own accord.

The troubled relationship is not only shared between the husband-wife but also seen in the relationship that Savitri shares with her friends and son. Just like his father, Ashok behaves indifferently with her. Though she invites influential people to her house for Ashok to bag a job, he disapproves of her action greatly. Following the routes of his father's patriarchal tendency, he beats up his sisters. In fact, Savitri herself treats her kids in such despicable ways that it often reminds the audience of the practice of slavery. Juneja, Savitri's friend, tells her that she will not ever find a perfect man and should stop her futile search. He remarks that she would have felt the same frustration she feels with Mahendranath even if she got married to someone else. Her friends do not understand her emotions and consider her as a use-and-throw object.

The entire play has hints of Savitri's extra-marital relationships with other men. Though apparently, this might seem like a lack of morality, Savitri cannot be referred to as an adulteress. She desperately hopes for love and an ideal life partner and also wants Ashok to get a job so that he can take care of her after being financially independent. Taking the high points of her friends' lives, she wishes to have a man who would have all the traits together. Little does she realize that one man cannot possess all good qualities, and her delusional viewpoints make her suffer more. Her situation projects the state of lovelessness scattered all throughout the play.

The family members lead a solitary life and do not communicate with one another. Being so alienated, they become materialistic and loveless by nature. The irony lies in the fact that everyone wants love but is not ready to offer it to others. Rakesh does not clearly sketch Savitri's relationship with her friends. No one would know for sure if she has or does not have a sexual relationship with her friends. Due to traces of incongruity in her husband's character, she is always in touch with Manoj, Shivjeet and Jagmohan. Juneja's character is the representation of Savitri's illicit relations with other men. However, the playwright nowhere in the drama raises any question about Savitri's character. He does not indicate anywhere that Savitri is forced to engage in sexual activities with others, rather she does everything of her own accord. The only possible explanation that comes out of her behavior is her search for a perfect companion.

Mahendranath and Savitri's relationship is totally illogical, irrational and does not have any correspondence to the surroundings. Quite naturally, this results in a state of anguish, uncertainty and depression. Both the partners refuse to have mutual sacrifice and trust, and their denial brings in a sense of absurdity with their temperamental incompatibility. The confusion and chaos not only threaten to disrupt their materialistic life but also the value system of the very foundation. With the failure of their marriage, Rakesh brings out the real tragedy of a modern man - his incapability to be compassionate and understanding about another man's life. He fails to invariably communicate with others, and Rakesh uses this symbolism in *Halfway House* aplenty.

The names that Rakesh uses in the play bring the absurdity on the surface. Mahendranath, the king of Gods, does not live a royal life here; instead, he is just the opposite and lives almost a gutter rat. The name 'Mahendra' refers to Lord Indra, who is known for luxury, wealth and glory poses a direct contradiction to Mahendranath, who represents dire poverty, helplessness and humiliation. Savitri, the great mythological character, is a woman

of strength who rescues her husband and symbolizes devotion, fidelity and sacrifice. The drama's Savitri is opposite from every aspect. Rakesh brings out the absurdity of modern life by assigning completely contradictory traits to the characters. Neither the family members can change themselves nor can they change the situation they are living in. Such disintegration at the psychic and materialistic level brings out the tragedy of the family.

The play is absurd in technique and not in nature. The way Rakesh in which treats it does not leave any place for direct physical action. Constant references to the past make it evident that those incidents have weaved the present scenario and the emotions have all culminated to become a frustration for all. The past is brought before the audience not by action but by pieces and fragments of conversation. This same technique is used to describe the characters to their core. Their nature cannot be seen through their actions but are conveyed by others in their dialogues. Everyone explains the other person from their perspective. Hence, only absurd and partial truths come out from that, which is both meaningful and meaningless at the same time.

Institution of marriage is questioned

In *Halfway House*, Rakesh makes it clear that the society's outlook on the institution of marriage must be questioned. An ideal marriage ceremony should have the husband and wife taking the oath to remain loyal to each other throughout their lives. This very bond gets shaky in Savitri and Mahendranath's marriage. Apart from all the physical torture, Savitri does not remain pious, and both their faults turn it into an unhealthy relationship and the pure bond of love disappear from their house. Mahendranath is not being able to meet with Savitri's expectations after marriage as he has no source of income. Savitri's life has turned her bitter; neither she can achieve anything in life nor can she get rid of running the household. Not only her husband but she also faces negligence from her children as well. Her aspiration to spend her life with a complete and accomplished man ruins her, and her disillusioned views are enough to disintegrate her married life.

Rakesh drops hints throughout the play that marriage should be fixed on the basis of status and wealth but should be considered on love and character. Clouded by her own thoughts, she does not pay any heed to Binni's likes or dislikes and wants her to marry someone rich and privileged. Either way, Binni does not have a happy and lasting married life. Manoj, her husband, accuses her of bringing some infection from her parental home and breaks up with her on that account. Rakesh sketches Savitri's character while keeping in mind about the value of a woman's chastity in Indian socio-culture. Unlike any other traditional woman, Savitri tolerates her existing condition and looks out for ways to improve the financial condition of her family. She embodies the image of a modern woman who does everything within her reach to change their financial and psychological needs. Though a sharp contrast to the traditional timid woman, she has sufferings of her own from which she cannot break free.

Different kinds of dramatic devices like, 'One man playing five different roles', 'The Prologue' and 'Repetition and omission of language' in this drama. The prologue, with Brecht's principle in it, has a note of alienation in it so that the audience immediately feel detached and can judge the play from a critical perspective. The prologue itself hints at the possibilities of existentialism and

absurd nature, but as the play progresses, realism makes its way. The playwright also takes inspiration from Beckett's theater and Camus' discursive writings for his opening scene. There is a sense of suspense prevailing in the air and the audience is thrown into an air of oblivion where the characters have full knowledge of everything but they do not. This impossibility in comprehending and explaining things is an absurdist pattern and can be found abundantly in Ionesco and Beckett's works.

Power of the language

The language used is unparalleled when seen from a theatrical point of view. The success of the play hugely depends on the language used in it, and *Halfway House* does it with elan. Rakesh appropriately uses the right words in the context of the situation of the character. Simple and plain that fits in any middle-class family, the language is powerful at the same time to release the tension and the psychological disturbance of the family members. Simple words have deep connotations and are laced with different contextual implications. In many places, the playwright has deliberately omitted or repeated the words as needed. This helps to project the otherwise unspoken pain and restlessness of the characters. Mahendranath's dialogues display his nervousness, his agitation and the imbalance that he has in his mind. Rakesh believed that the unspoken would convey more intimately than anything spoken.

Modernist or modern fiction normally does not allow any dramatic projection or dialogic appearing in the chosen situations. E. Alkazi explains this phenomenon in *Halfway House*. He says that the intensity of suffocation and loneliness symbolizes the disintegrated life and drowns the differences and counter voices. To deal with the issues, Rakesh could have allowed the clashing perspectives to come out in broad daylight so that they can address the audience with their own dramatic space. In such tense situations, using silences effectively and twisting appearing forms would not be necessary for capturing the colors and tones of life.

"The real commitment of a writer is not to any particular philosophy but to himself, his times and the life of his times." The motto of this line gets reflected in Rakesh's play. He was a firm believer of the fact that his writings should have a shadow of his immediate surroundings. He saw the conflicts and turmoil in relationships all around him and gave that touch to Mahendranath and Savitri's marriage. He presented his play in a modern setting and wrapped it around with issues like ego clash and lack of enough communication. This dysfunctional family has got no way to escape from their doom and has to bear the brunt of it forever. The impact of post-naturalist drama is found here as the family oscillates between absurdist and naturalist discourse.

A stark similarity can be seen in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Rakesh's *Halfway House*. Pozzo and Lucky from Beckett's play and Mahendranath and Savitri from Rakesh's drama are similar in a way that they are destined to live together. Despite the unbearable living conditions, both cannot survive without one another and share a sealed future. Neither one can figure out with whom the real trouble lies and who should take the responsibility of freeing the other one. There are also a few scenes where a sense of false expectation crops up but nothing happens ultimately to change the existing situation.

The play is wrought with a male agenda. The troubled family only communicates with half-uttered resentments and does not pay

enough heed to Savitri's attempts to make things normal. She is dismissed over and over again, even though she is overworking, trying to pick up the broken fragments of her family and attempting to earn money in order to cover up Mahendranath's bad financial condition. Mahendranath overlooks his mistakes and feels as if he is always wronged by his wife and believes that she is constantly pitching herself to more powerful and wealthier men. As the play approaches its end, there is an undercutting of Savitri's efforts and sacrifices for her family and inaction becomes more desirable than action.

With the wish of achieving a sense of completeness, Savitri is constantly in search of it and holds the center stage in this absurdist drama. Being a part of the broken family, Binny and Kinny bear traits of their mother and are extensions of her. Binny's unsuccessful marriage and Kinny's unstable mind are reflections of Savitri. The elder daughter returns home frequently due to her dissatisfaction in her marriage, and the younger one remains oblivious to the familial strifes and has a brattish behavior. On the other side, Ashok's revulsion towards his mother and a state of total indifference towards being financially independent show how he had adapted Mahendranath's characteristics. He looks down upon Savitri so much that he admonishes her whenever she tries to get him a job.

Savitri's dialogues explain Mahendranath's character and revealed that he has no individual personality. He behaves meekly before his friends and becomes an object in their hands but changes his form as soon as he comes back home. It can be understood from Binny's dialogues as well about her parents' abusive relationship. She expresses in horror that Mahendranath's behavior towards Savitri cannot be imagined by any outsider. Rakesh uses cruel images for Mahendranath and not Savitri. But this cruelty is not enough to protect the play's gender biases. Lights are thrown on the events in such manner that Mahendranath's brutality lies in the past but Savitri's sins have changed the family forever and give a forever-haunting vibe.

The quick back-and-forth construction of the narrative makes it clear to the audience that each character wants to say more but somewhere is restricting themselves. Unspoken utterances continue to pile up one on another, and Savitri finally blurts out about her abusive marriage. But just when she gathers up enough courage to call it quits, her husband leaves the house. This creates an inescapable situation as she becomes the caregiver of all and cannot unburden herself of all her sufferings. However, Ashok finally brings his father back in the house with one of the friends' help.

Mahendranath's return at the end of the play completes the circle and takes everyone back to the starting point. All incomplete beings gather around in the same house, the eternal 'hell'. It is left up to the audience to decide whether Mahendranath or Savitri is the bigger sinner. The play successfully touches the sensitive nerve of the anxious middle-class people of that period as they went through a change and tried to cope with modern life. The significance of the title lies with Savitri's feel of living an insatiable life with an incomplete man. This realization suffocates her but slowly she understands that all men would be fragmented and she would be happy with no one.

Though apparently, it projects the women's enslavement in the world of patriarchy, the play does not ultimately unfold into that. The last scenes hurl judgemental comments about Savitri from her husband's friend. He accuses her of destroying

Mahendranath's life by assassinating his sense of manhood since she continuously tries to replace him with other more powerful men. Savitri does not get any justice even when she mentions the physical trauma she had to go through. The man reasons with her that Mahendranath is just like any other man and probably that is what is wrong with him.

Conclusion

Mohan Rakesh has earnestly used the drama form in every nook and corner of the Halfway House. The first technique that he has used is to make one actor enact the five male roles. Next come the names of the characters where they are mentioned properly via dialogues but are constantly referred to as the older girl, younger girl, man, boy etc. Dialogues have a tone of naturalistic air, almost similar to those in long and short fiction. As a result of all these, the situations and incidents depicted on stage gets perceived by different people in a different manner and makes the drama widely applauded by everyone.

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