

MOHAN RAKESH'S *HALF WAY HOUSE*: LANGUAGE, SETTING AND ATMOSPHERE

Dr. Shailaja B. Wadikar

Asst. Professor in English
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies,
S.R.T.M. University,
Nanded, Maharashtra

New Drama: Non-conventional Elements

A drama is quite different from a novel or a poem, since it is something more than simple words on the page. Playwrights expect their plays to be performed on the stage. So, the themes are presented through dialogues, action, music, songs, and dance. A play is, thus, performance-oriented rather than reader-oriented.

The post-war plays differ radically from the previous conventional plays. Instead of presenting imaginary places of human fancy, the post-war playwrights represent in their plays the events and incidents that are true to life. They have rebelled against the conventional theatre of “well-made” plays with plots, neatly divided into acts and scenes. They are considered the iconoclasts or the image breakers, as they bring people face to face with the truth of life by the directness of their language and frankness of their opinion. They have loosened the grip of the rich on the theatre by choosing their protagonist from common people. Theatre has been made a part of human life; and that brings “liveliness” to it.

The language used is colloquial and roughshod and the setting is naturalistic. Previously, many plays have been set against the background of the drawing room of fine houses. The post-war plays have a rather seedy setting. The term used for them is “kitchen-sink drama”, which implies a movement away from refinement and elegance to harsh realities of life. So, the action takes place in kitchens, boarding houses, one-room flats, etc. The plays exhibit a new voice of protest, an anti-heroic mode, and a concern for realism. They are thoroughly impressed in the tumult and activity of their society. In doing so, they have come closer to the “great magnetic chain”¹ of humanity.

The main motive of the dramatists is to get away from the oft-handled themes and situations. Considering themselves as responsible members of society, they present the turmoil and make the audience conscious of the revolting mood of anger of the young generation as the world fails to respond to them.

In new drama, the classical concept of “three unities” of time, place, and action is strictly maintained. Dialogues are short and trenchant. Conventional devices such as “soliloquies” and “asides” have been completely avoided.

Conventional dramatists have borrowed the plots of their plays from various sources, whereas non-conventional dramatists pay little heed to the story or the development of plot or

characterization in their plays. The plots are loose and the scenes do not seem to have any vital link with the main thread of the story. The plot is intricate and confusing; it lacks coherence.

There are no conventional heroes, heroines, or villains in new drama. All the characters have, more or less, equal importance. They are the vehicles of certain ideas, which the dramatist wants to put forward through them. Thus, they may be seen as his mouthpieces. Nevertheless, they are never mere dummies or conventional types. They are lively and vigorous. The dialogues are sharp, witty, jerky, and half-finished; yet they signify more than what they say.

Plays that are written and performed in the later half of the 20th century make a fresh departure in the choice of the subject-matter and the staging of a play. Instead of writing long plays, the new playwrights prefer to write short, one-or two-act plays. The scenes change smoothly, directed by the commentary of the *sutradhara* on most of the occasions.

In the new plays, the playwright tries to speak through different characters. The style varies from one character to another. Each person has his / her own style of speaking. Hence, the dramatist's achievement lies in the art of scripting dialogues to suit the personality of a character.

The dialogues are short and crisp. Long speeches are avoided and quick exchanges are used which are often laced with wit. The language used is highly sententious. In order to create a sensation of the spoken word, a colloquial language is often used. Such structural devices as irony, pun, etc., and such figures of speech as simile, metaphor, personification, etc., are used to add complexity and amusement that need a close attention and a careful thinking on the part of the audience. Dialogues, sometimes, rhyme with each other. They add a rhythmic quality and a light mood to the scene. An extremely roughshod and abusive language is also used according to the necessity of the situation. It adds to the intensity of the vulgar reality as well as throws light on the efforts of the dramatist to use the device of cacophony denoting a very harsh, unmusical language which results into an ambiguous or equivocal meaning and difficulties in the racy flow of words. However, a pleasantly smooth, melodious language is also used on occasions so as to achieve euphony.

An effective use of pantomime, or to use the more recent term, "body language", is made in the new plays. The "gestures" and "silences" sometimes speak more than words. Poetic dialogues are intertwined with prose dialogues. Sometimes, a character is seen reciting poems in the course of an action to express the dramatist's pathos and compassion. Such characters appear to be the mouthpieces of the dramatist. The poems sound rather prosaic but have functional value. All these variations weave a superb pattern of rich and complex meaning, however. A new play aims to instruct by pleasing. Mohan Rakesh says:

To my mind the function of theatre is not just to entertain, nor just to reveal certain ironies and contradictions of man's mind and behaviour, nor just to philosophize or sermonize over certain socio-political issues. For me, the major function of theatre today is to help man know and discover himself in relation to his environment.²

All these dimensions and effects are achieved by means of various techniques. Visual delight is offered by scenes, lighting, colours, and costumes. Singing and dancing are the integral parts of the play's action. They are used not for their own sake but to establish the appropriate mood and to provide a comment on the action. At the same time, they serve a dual purpose: (a) to provide a dramatic relief after a tense situation, and (b) to reinforce the tense atmosphere, too.

The new playwrights endeavour with more or less success to develop theatre as an object of instruction or as a means of public communication at large rather than as a mere means of amusement and entertainment. Thus, they turn the audience into watchful observers thereby

enabling them to evaluate and judge. The audience leaves the theatre not with calm, pacified but with ruffled mind. The play compels them to think and to contemplate. It is for this reason that such eminent writers as Shaw, Galsworthy, Barker, etc., of the British theatre and Tendulkar, Karnad, Sircar, and Rakesh of the Indian theatre are considered new, besides being ironic and anti-romantic playwrights.

Indian English Drama

The growth of the Indian drama originally written in English remained poor. Although the translated plays of Tagore, Madhusudan Dutt contributed a lot to the development of the Indian English drama, the “problems of language and translation have affected some of Tagore’s plays. Moreover, his English translations lack the flavour and spirit of the originals in Bengali.”³ Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a Bengali writer, translated plays such as *Ratnawali*, *Sermista*, etc. His devotional plays were based on the lives of the Indian saints.

In the later half of the 1950s, several plays in regional languages were translated into English and established a link between the East and the West. The Indian playwrights Girish Karnad in Kannada, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi noticed that Indian literature was an entity in itself despite the fact that it was written in many languages. One of the reasons of the popularity of their plays was their truthfulness to contemporary life. These four dramatists made bold innovations and fruitful experiments and stimulated the growth of the Indian national theatre movement.

Half Way House: Language, Stage Setting, and Atmosphere

Actually, the play *Half Way House* has no story in the traditional sense. There is no development of action. The play ends where it starts. In the construction of the plot structure, Rakesh seems to have turned up from traditional style, i. e., beginning, middle, and end. The movement of the play is neither horizontal nor vertical; instead, it is circular and very subtle.

The play perfectly follows the rule of three unities: Time, Place and Action. All the actions take place in the drawing room of Mahendranath’s house. There is not much action on the stage. Through the conversation of the characters, the playwright throws light on their past events and actions. The play covers the period of just two or three days. Therefore, there is the perfect unity of time, place and action. The new technique of one person playing the four roles reinforces the idea that all men are alike having different appearances but same nature. The play portrays the society where woman is always taken for granted and she is considered and also utilized just as use and throw object. From this perspective, the play is contemporary since its subject matter is universal and therefore goes beyond time and place.

The language of the play is quite simple and appropriate for the members of a middle class family. It is, at the same time, powerful enough to convey the tension, the mental disturbance, the sense of frustration of the characters. Repetition and omission of words and incomplete utterances reflect the restlessness of the characters. “It is cool at the hands of Mahendranath, sharp when used by Savitri and Juneja, light and funny when Singhanian speaks, pointed and witty in the case of Ashok, obstinate and rude in the case of Kinni and confused when Binni wants to articulate her problem....It is neither lyrical nor literary. It is the language of the common man, man in the street, in accordance with the requirements of the play.”⁴

The locale of *Half Way House* is a sitting room. It appears rather old and shabby. It comprises a sofa, chairs, a table, a cupboard, a few files etc. The present condition of the items throws light on the financial difficulties faced by the family.

At the very onset, it is narrated: “ A room, usable for almost any purpose and in which are the tangible remains of the family’s earlier status: living room set, dining table, dressing table, etc., all crammed in.” (36) This disorderly room indirectly exhibits that here, one cannot lead a peaceful, jolly, harmonious life. It also shows the irresponsibility of the family members. The broken items convey a sort of restlessness that characterizes the family. It also brings to notice the lack of decorum in the interactions between the members.

On the cot, there lies an open school bag with half of its contents scattered around. This open school-bag and the spilt out books show Kinni’s irresponsibility, her lack of interest in studies as well as her anger. It is evocative of attitude, situations, and behavioural pattern of the concerned character. In the course of action, later on, the audience comes to know that Kinni is angry with all the family members since her school requirements always remain unfulfilled. No one in the family has time to prevent her from going astray. She also feels neglected and dejected.

Another important object is the pair of pajamas, hanging on the back of the chair. It belongs to Mahendranath and indicates his place and position in the family. Due to the loss in business, he has been reduced to the position of non-entity. He is lacking in self-confidence and considers himself parasite. The pair of pajamas, dangling at the back of the chair is a powerful symbol of a defeated, self-deprecating, parasitical man.

Savitri, after entering the room, picks up the pajamas with a statement: “The boss left his special touch here.” (40) She looks at it as if it was a dead animal. She is about to throw it in a corner but then starts folding it angrily saying: “If someone stays home all day long, the least they could do is fold their clothes.” (40) Before putting the pajamas in the cabinet, she gets further annoyed on seeing the tea cups on the table. She throws the pajama on the chair and starts arranging the tea cups on the tray. This throwing away of the pajamas indicates Savitri’s feeling for Mahendranath. Mahendranath’s lack of confidence and dynamism, his loss of initiative to make another start, and his irresponsibility towards the family create the feeling of contempt in Savitri. Her decision, to leave the house and to go away with Jagmohan to fulfil the dream of peaceful, happy life with a complete man is actually symbolized by this action. And she tries also to throw away Mahendranath from her life in the same manner she throws away the pajamas.

However, after Mahendranath’s arrival, she puts this pair of pajamas in the cabinet though angrily. Subhash Chandra points out, “Thus, the action of picking up the pajamas with “distaste” exhibits her dislike for the man, for the pajamas, metaphorize the owner, intending to throw them into a corner, stands for her action of leaving Mahendranath (and the family) for Jagmohan, and her eventually folding the pajamas even though irritatedly and keeping them in the cupboard hints, in a subtle way, at her eventually not discarding Mahendra.”⁵

Towards the end of the play, Savitri leaves the house with Jagmohan (with a decision never to return) but she has to return again though very unwillingly due to Jagmohan’s refusal to accept her. The whole spectrum of Savitri’s feeling towards Mahendranath is indicated through her angry look at the pair of pajamas and her folding it and keeping it in the cupboard,(although, first she has thrown it away in the corner) symbolize her compromise with her husband and family as she has no-escape-route.

It is informed that there are two or three old magazines, a pair of scissors, and some cut or half cut pictures on the sofa. Savitri sarcastically utters “And that’s what Ashok does all day long....This is how he spends his time.” (40) She picks up the scissors, magazine, cuttings and journals and puts them into the drawer of the writing-desk; puts the scattered book into the bag and places it neatly on one side. Outwardly, it seems that she tides the room as her boss

Singhania is going to visit her at her house. But thinking seriously, her tidying the room and putting the things in order symbolically represent her frantic efforts to save the family and to make it a place worth for living. Otherwise, she could have just flung all these things somewhere in the other room to put them out of sight.

The setting exhibits the irresponsible and indifferent behaviour of the male members, i. e., Mahendranath and Ashok. From Savitri's remarks and from the cut out pictures from the magazines, it is revealed how Ashok used to while away his time. When Savitri is about to go inside the kitchen to put the empty cup of tea, Mahendranath arrives. She looks straight at him but he avoids her look. He tries to find something so that he can keep himself busy with. Ashok and Mahendranath neither share the financial responsibility nor the house-hold chores. And Savitri, although is a working woman, manages the house perfectly. She always indulges herself in purposive, responsible actions. Ashok and Mahendranath only contribute to the disorder. His doing nothing tendency and his pretence to show himself busy indirectly indicates why he has remained unsuccessful in business efforts.

Towards the end of the play, the stage lights go down and are limited only to Binni, and Savitri. Both of them sit down in the chair, staring outside. Right then, in almost total darkness, the shadow of Mahendranath is seen walking inside, holding onto Ashok's arm. The play ends with Ashok's statement "Careful, Daddy, careful," (124) which has been uttered by Juneja also previously. These statements communicate us that Mahendranath is ill. But his illness does not evoke the feeling of sympathy either in Savitri or in Binni. The scene also exhibits Juneja's and Ashok's concern for Mahendranath.

Throughout the play Rakesh maintains the economy of words. Only through the stage directions at very beginning of the play, one can correctly guess the central idea of the play.

REFERENCES:

1. Moses, Sudha D. *Anger and Commitment in the Post-war British Drama*. An unpublished thesis. Matahwada University, Aurangabad, 1970, 143.
2. M. Maharshi. "Changing Role of Words in Theatre". An interview with Mohan Rakesh. *Enact*. Jan.-Feb., 1973, 73-74. Quoted by Asha S. Kanwar . *Ghashiram Kotwal : A Study Guide*. New Delhi: IGNOU, 1993, 45.
3. Dharan , N. S.. *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999, 21.
4. Sharma, O. P. "Halfway House: A Powerful Dramatization of New Sensibility". *Mohan Rakesh's Halfway House; Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Asia Books, 2001, 75.
5. Chandra, Subhash, "Stage-setting and Stage Direction in *Halfway House*". *Mohan Rakesh's Halfway House: Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Asia Books, 2001, 81.