

LANGUAGE OF ANARCHY AND CHAOS: THEATRE OF THE ABSURD AND MAHESH ELKUCHWAR'S *APOCALYPSE*

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The objective of this essay is to highlight the influence of Absurdism in Indian theatre with especial reference to Mahesh Elkuchwar's play. This essay can be divided into three sections. The first section highlights the origin and development of the theatre of absurd in literary world. The second section of this paper illustrates the basic information about the work and place of Elkuchwar in Indian theatrical arena. And the third section analyzes it to find out rudiments of Absurdism as well as its fundamental constituents which establish the *Apocalypse* as an Indian Absurdist play.

Mahesh Elkuchwar has been the vanguard of not just Marathi theatre but Indian theatre for almost forty years. Today, along with Satish Alekar and Vijay Tendulkar, he is one of the most influential and progressive playwrights not just in modern Marathi theatre, but also modern Indian Theatre. Beginning his career as a dramatist in seventies, he has twenty two dramas to his credit, a good number of which have been translated and produced in major Indian languages. He emerged onto the national theatre scene with the publication of his one act play *Sultan* in 1967 in noted literary magazine *Satyakatha*. This play was immediately noticed by Vijaya Mehta, She went on to direct four of his early play including *Holi* and *Sultan* by in 1970 for Rangayan. He is both a venerated and a controversial figure in country's theatre scene. Vijaya Mehta, a theatre director writes in foreword that:

Theatre for Mahesh is his connection with life through which he questions restlessly, and at times ponders and reflects about issues that intrigue him... with his quest for stretching boundaries, Mahesh remains essentially a renaissance playwright... Mahesh's plays continue to be relevant and exciting to this day and demand the attention of the new generation (Mehta, XII).

Over the years Mahesh Elkuchwar has written and produced some of the most essential and progressive plays of post-independence India. Elkuchwar is credited with acclaimed plays like *Rudraravsha (The Tempestuous Rain)*, *Sultan (The Oppressive Emperor)*, *Zumbar, EkaMhatarchyaKhoon (An Old Man's Murder)*, *Kaifiyat, EkOsadGaon, Yatnagar (The Chamber of Anguish)*, *Garbo, Vasnakhand (Desire in the Rocks)*, *Party, Raktapushpa (The Flower of Blood)*, *Wada Chirebandi (Old Stone Mansion)*, *Pratibimb, Aatmakatha (Autobiography)*, *Magna Talyakathi (The Pond)*, *Yugant (Apocalypse)*, *WaasaaniJeernaani... (As One Discardeth One's Cloths)*, *Dharmaputra (Godson)*, *Sonata* and *EkaNatachyaMrityu (An Actor Exits)*.

Mahesh Elkunchwar is very conscious about the role of theatre in society as well as the ideologies involved in the creation of any dramatic work in contemporary Indian society. He is highly critical of ideologies when it comes to theatre, says: “I am not an ideological animal. I decided to write about the private aches and pains of individuals...at a time when the whole atmosphere was charge with idealism”(Elkunchwar1 331). Elkunchwar is not a radical reactionary who denounced the use of ideology in creating a literary work, in fact he is against that notion where art was forsaken and marginalized because of codified political language. He further argues that:

A pursuit of ideology must not close doors to deep human experience. The personal private, metaphysical side of human life must not be elapsd the public and political interperatives of the day... I have always convened that no ideologies is greater than life itself (Elkunchwar1 333).

Elkuchwar is agreed on to the thought that ideology offers relief and changes the society from time to time, but he makes a point saying that “there is no religion, no ideology, no political programme that has brought complete happiness or relief to humanity...art tries to transcend tangible reality and aspires to journey into an unnameable indefinable reality that is constantly pulsating beneath the topical” (Elkunchwar1 334). While Tendulkar has been quite often accused by critics and scholars of appropriating ideas from western plays and films and Indianizing them. Elkunchwar is not worried about western influences. He says in this regard:

I am too confident of my Indianess to let it bother me. I shall lift and digest as much of that influence as I want. Knowledge, art, and the treasury of various cultures are not the monopoly of any one country or one human community. This treasury is open to all (Elkuchwar1 329).

Mahesh Elkunchwar is keen observer of human psyche. He wanted to bring everything out in the open, protesting against a whole baggage of taboos and inhibitions. He does not want to bear the Burden of conventional morality. His plays disregard the peripheral view of life and seeks to go beyond the apparent, the obvious, in order to penetrate to the unsuspected depths of life, arrests in words the they continually changing flux of life. He rejects the surface reality, which is often deceptive and misleading. Elkunchwar refuses to view characters from outside, instead he seeks to get inside them, to know their inner problem, to comprehend the quality of their feelings and experiences, to reports what goes on inside their minds, in short, to get the core of reality. Indeed, his plays are remarkable for their comprehensive view of life they presents-not bits of life, but the whole of life. He enunciates his understanding by stating that:

When a writer writes, he writes about the subjective man who is the epicentre of his experience. That is why an individual’s private pain is as important as the pain of the mass of humanity, and can also be easily shared as a universal experience (Elkunchwar1 334).

Ultimately we realize that one strong cord unites all of Elkunchwar’s drama the individual quest for fulfilment, or its social denial, with disillusionment waiting at every step of the way. His works posed a challenge to directors who do not dare to cross the imaginary barriers between the real and surreal. But those who have been able to defy those imaginary constructions have created remarkable pieces of thematic, which have gone beyond the frontiers of the Marathi theatre- Particularly into Bengali, Hindi, and English.

Basically Esslin’s description of Absurdism in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, is an account of the beginning of Absurdism. “Theatre of the Absurd” is a phrase taken from Albert Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) in which Camus defined the absurd as the tension

which emerges from man's determination to discover purpose and order in world which steadfastly refuses to evidence either. The writers in the theatre of the Absurd diagnosed humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surrounding. Thus Absurd drama is the drama that deals with the absurdities and inescapable ills of life. Though the direct and acknowledged influences of theatre of absurd come from the Dadaists, the surrealist and the Persian avant-garde yet in its present form it is a post war phenomenon.

Martin Esslin wrote a book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) to popularize the absurdist drama. He says that it is a term applied to a group of dramatists in 1950s who did not regard themselves as a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes towards the predicament of the man in the universe. The drama of Absurd arises from the disillusionment and loss of certitude characteristic of our time. It faces a universe that has lost its meaning and purpose. Its first and main role is satirical when it criticises a society that is petty and dishonest.

Esslin also mentions that Absurd plays have no story or plot to speak of; these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost puppets; these often have neither a beginning nor an end; these often seems to be the reflections of dreams and nightmares; and there is neither witty reporter nor any pointed dialogue, rather it consists of incoherent babblings. The works of absurdist writers most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupation and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the western world.

The Theatre of the Absurd is to a very considerable extent concerned with a critique of language, an attack above all on fossilized forms of language which have become devoid of meaning. The people talking of any matter had no intention whatever of really exchanging meaningful information on subject; they merely using language to fill the emptiness between them, to conceal the fact that they had no desire to tell each other anything at all.

The Plays of the Theatre of the Absurd in general, present a disillusioned, harsh and stark picture of the world. The realism of these plays is a psychological and inner realism; they explore the human sub-conscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence. Nor is it quite correct that these play deeply pessimistic as they are nothing but an expression of utter despair. It is true that basically the Theatre of the Absurd attack the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. The major dramatists of this tradition are Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean genet, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee.

Elkunchwar reserves a special place for *Yugant (Apocalypse)* which was written in 1992 and is the last part of his famous *Wada trilogy*, it carries all his "preoccupation and positions" as clearly as they can be. It is a play about the inner landscape of four characters and about the devastation and badlands created by malicious deeds of human beings. The picture Elkunchwar draws is grim and frightening. *Apocalypse* is one act play and divided into four scenes that create a sense of wilderness all around. In short presents an absurd and chaotic situation where there is no value, no order, no stability, and lawfulness has remained except the environmental as well as moral, spiritual, social, cultural, ethical deterioration.

The plot of *Apocalypse* unfolds the various constituent parts of the story like loss/acquisition, search/discovery, recognition/non-recognition, and degradation/ degeneration/ decay in various spheres of the lives of its four main characters: Abhay, Parag, Nandani and Chandu. As play begins, Abhay enters into the mansion "covered in dust, knocked out by the heat, panting, licking his parched lips, wiping his perspiring neck and forehead" (258). His meeting and conversation with Nandini gives us the apocalyptic images of their deserted life and land. There was nothing but the anarchy and the chaos. The meeting between Abay and Nandini not

only formulates the plot of the play but also gives us the glimpses of the past. Their discussion provides the anarchic vision of the village which had been once a very flourishing and prosperous. The land of village which was once very fertile and verdant has also become barren and uninhabited. It is through their conversation, readers become familiar with the repellent and dismayed condition of the village. As Abhay reveals to Nandini about his agonising ordeals during journey to the village:

I just manage to drag myself here through the blistering heat. Not a tree, not a bush. Foot –burning yellow dust underneath. And above a blazing sky like furnace burst open. Around me, the earth cracked and fissured as far as the eye could see. (pause.) I hardly knew whether I was on the right road. In fact I couldn't see a road at all. Just barrenness (259).

The arrival of Parag and his discussion with, cousin, Abhay on the current issues describes the futility and meaninglessness of science, religion and human existence. Parag has survived the annihilation and he embodies the most basic human need: survival. He says to Abhay “ It is we , finally, who create our own desert” (268) and “the time has come time has come when I must see the destruction, bit by bit, of all that was dear and familiar to me once in this environment” (266). Whereas Abhay “hails life as a punishment” (268) and questions his own existence saying “there is no place for choice” (268). Parag's meeting with Chandu Kaka also bring to light the degradation and decay of human life and turning of human being into a lowly creature. As Parag recounts the event of his meeting with Chandukaka:

On Dashaswamedhghat, sitting in a row of beggars. Hair matted, beard grown wild, filthy nails... I couldn't bear to look at him. I sat him before barber and got him shaved first..the spent an our washing him. He started looking human after that. When the food came, he fell upon it so hungrily that I had to turn my face away” (263).

The space of the *Apocalypse* is closely and inseparably linked with the absurd plays. Though this play includes the range of space from Sweden to India, yet the action takes place entirely in a deserted and uninhabited village. The single location takes on the form of a prison for the characters, a space from which they either cannot leave or are afraid to do so. The condition of the village is exceedingly depressing and gloomy. As Nandini tells Abhay about the macabre reality of the village:

There are no animal left , except for a few dogs. No birds either. People have hunted them down and eaten them all, one by one... Many have left. Some have stayed. The old. The lame... No outsider has come this way in the last five year. You're the first... All the roads have vanished under the dust... the wells dried up long ago (259-260).

And Abhay reveals his experience of journey to Nandini saying: “There was just me and the driver. No third –not even a conductor” (258). The extreme dismal and nasty description of the village produced the dream-like atmosphere in the play which is the key characteristic of Absurd drama. Elkunchwar creates dream-like situations through his use of paralysis, the inability to decide, act or change. The characters of the play be it Parag, Nandini or Abhay , absorb themselves into this quandary. They are unable to react, to response and to come out of this catastrophe.

The time in the play is not specified as play open with describing “Time: today tomorrow, or any time in future” (258). This is a very important and basic characteristic of absurd drama. Here, in this absurd space, time lacks any regular, everyday cyclicality and there are

absolutely no indications of historical time, no identifying traces of the era. Thus all the actions, all the events and adventures that fill it, constitute time-sequences that are neither historical nor quotidian nor biographical. That's why actions take place outside these sequences. In this play the kind of time used where nothing changes: the world remain as it was, the biographical lives of its protagonists do not change, their feeling do not change, and people do not even age. Even the dialogues of its characters seem uncertain about the precision of the time frame –as Nandini tells Abhay that Parag will come “today or tomorrow” and “someday, one of us will have to go” Parag says “one day the rain will come” and he will meet Abhay “ Somewhere. Certainly.” So it is evident through given examples that there is lack of certainty and surety regarding the time among its characters.

Since the *time* and *space* in *Apocalypse* has been discussed. The focus is now on the function of language in absurd plays. And as mentioned above that the Theatre of the Absurd is to a very considerable extent concerned with a critique of language an attack above all on fossilized forms of language which have become devoid of meaning. It is through language *Apocalypse* unfolds the significant issues which are directly relevant to our contemporary culture –weight, race, abuse, relationships, marriage, self-definition, anxiety, despair, death , isolation and meaninglessness. But it is FALSE and EMPTY language because it neither gives any solution nor provides any vindication for unjustified plight and wretched condition of their (its characters') lives.

The language used in the whole play provides a sense of misery, depression, gloom, dejection, helplessness and loneliness. There is no scope for any ray of hope and to live as one desire to live. For instance, Abhay speaks to Parag regarding the vainness of human existence: “To me even life is punishment. Yet I don't want to die. But what we want or don't want doesn't figure in this scheme. There is no place for choice” (268). The interaction between Parag and Abhay also highlight the frustration born out of the circumstances they face in their lives. The language itself is also tinged with violence, especially when the topic is something seemingly trivial. Both of them try to hurt each other using harsh language and presenting the unsympathetic realities of their lives. Both of them use language as a tool to express their frustration which reminds me of Pozzo's speech in *Waiting for Godot* that is filled with more nonsense than sense — more that is illogical than that which is logical.

Furthermore as Martin Esslin enunciates in his introduction to Absurd Drama that “The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely it in being –that is, in terms of concrete images” (25). *Apocalypse* neither tries to alter any blunder or mistake committed in the past, nor does it delivers any enlightened sermons to make amend in its audience/reader. Similarly it does not penetrate into the roots to discover the sources of present dreadful condition of human existence. So the function of language in *Apocalypse* is cleanly confined to convey the happenings of the play presenting the distinct and sharp images. The play has no clear-cut, specific and direct message for the audience/reader. It merely constructs a domain replete with the images of anarchism, mayhem, chaos, and disorder for the audience/reader and leaves its characters to confront it because there is no way out.

In conclusion, *Apocalypse* presents a picture, a portrait or a mirror which tries to present the absurdities in contemporary world with the help of his distinguished style. It reveals the use of his bold innovations and daring experiments in terms of themes and techniques. The play *Apocalypse* can be analysed on the multiple levels using the theories of existentialism, surrealism, modernism and futurism. The present essay is a humble attempt to reinterpret the *Apocalypse* as an Absurd play. In the post-structuralist world absurdism is a very popular mode

to present the harsh realities of life and it has a great potential for unlocking the mysteries of literary ontology changes the way one interpret the literary work and shattered all the philosophies to find the essence, substance and structures.

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