

**The changing dynamics and the prevalence of discorded familial alliances:
A revisit to Mahesh Elkunchwar's 'The Wada Trilogy'**

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Abstract

Mahesh Elkunchwar's '*The Wada Trilogy*' consists of three very important plays namely *Old Stone Mansion*, *Pond*, and *Apocalypse*. Elkunchwar's themes are wide ranging and uncomfortably real. He is considered as an Indian Renaissance playwright for being a writer who objectifies and questions the reprobation's of the society. The *Wada* trilogy is one of the very significant works of Elkunchwar which unfold the story of *Deshpandes* of *Dharangaon*, who were once very respected and reputed family of the village. But with time, they lost their genteel status and dignity. And the turn of fortunes changes the relationship dynamics and familial alliances of the *Wada*. The crumbling *Wada* holds the story of traditional alliances and the desperate struggle for survival after an end of glorious inheritance. This paper will try to bring forth and analyze these changing dynamics and their influence on the perturbed alliances of the family and the tailings of the family to maintain their age-old prestige and position in the face of villagers, and how the relationships are defined on the monetary terms, where the one with money holds power and the other without it is left at life's mercy which drags them to a terrible end. The importance of a sense of belonging and the importance of relationships in the formation of collectivistic dimensions of identity will also be discussed.

Keywords: dynamics, prevalence, identity, belonging, relationships.

Introduction

The Modern Indian theatre mainly has two main stages, the first is the Pre-Independence stage and the second one is the Post- Independence stage. Both these stages have vehement contributions to the development of the Indian English drama. It was around 1830s, that the first Bengali language theatre was set up in Bengal, with the backing of of rich native families.(Asia Society 2021).¹Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Bharati Sarabhai,

Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Harindranath Chatopadhyaya to name a few are the important playwrights of the Pre- Independence period. Their epiphanic contemplations and emphatic style of writing brought a new beginning in the genre. They started writing about the socio-economic and political conditions of the country and the struggles of the common man. They presented the dilemma that people of the time went through. Since the period was politically very vibrant and the social setup of the country was frequently going under changes, their writings presented the same.

In the post-independence stage, the National Drama Festival organized by Sahitya Natak Akademi in 1954 and the emergence of the National School of Drama in the year 1959 in Delhi turned out to be very significant in the development of theatre. Though earlier the dramas written and enacted were mostly in Indian languages, because English being a foreign language, was quite anomalous amongst the common people, and it was quite difficult for the playwrights to convey their thoughts to masses in a language foreign and unknown to most of them. And the playwrights found it weird to put English in the mouth of characters who belonged to rustic pedigree who at that point of time were unable to understand English. M.K. Naik talks about the same in his book *A History of Indian English Literature*, when he says: 'One major hurdle which the playwright in English is supposed to encounter is that of language. It is often said that we have so a few actable English plays because the dialogue in English between Indians will not sound convincing, except when the characters are drawn from an urban, sophisticated milieu, or Anglo Indians whose mother tongue is (supposed to be) English.' (Naik 225).ⁱⁱ

The contemporary Indian theatre is not a mere extension of the colonial or post-colonial theatre, rather it has its own theatrical textual materials and institutional and cultural conditions acquired from the experiences of political independence and cultural liberty that emerged out of sense of nationhood. (Dharwadker 25)ⁱⁱⁱ. Playwrights like Habib Tanveer, Asif Currimbhoy, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Mahesh Dattani, etc are some of the Indian English playwrights who wrote in their regional languages as well as in English in the contemporary Indian theatre. They wrote about the common men of society, their existential anguish and, the struggle and search for a meaningful life. Since they depict the real-life situations and existential angst of the characters, modern Indian theatre is considered as more pragmatic and tangible.

Mahesh Elkunchwar is one of the important creative experimental and progressive playwrights of India. His plays have wide-ranging themes from social to psychological and from realist to symbolic. He is more interested in the inner psyche of the character rather than the outer surroundings. He emphasizes the inner battles of the people that humans face throughout their life. The plays revolve around the anxieties, angst, and existential dilemma of human existence. There remains a continuous conflict between the conscious and the unconscious throughout his plays. His plays are very true to life with plots and characters resembling real-life situations and reactions. The plays are based on typical Indian themes and are rooted in the Indian culture. Since he has been an experimental playwright throughout, he undertakes various styles ranging from realism to symbolism and naturalism to

absurdum. His plays are realist in the sense that they emulate human behavior in real life. From themes to dialogues, plot, characters, actions in totality resonates actuality of life. Often he uses symbols and metaphors to convey the existential aspects and angst and trauma that humans face throughout. The play *Reflection* is a fine example that upholds the symbols of loss of human identity and the angst of survival. The crumbling *Wada* in the *Wada Trilogy* stood as the symbol of changing times and the loss of its legacy with time. The feeling of despair, sense of loss of identity, meaninglessness, and purposelessness of life, futility are the traits of the common man's existence that have been diligently portrayed in almost all of Elkunchwar's plays. He says;

'...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 a mass of humanity, and can also be easily shared as an universal experience.'(Elkunchwar 334)^{iv}

Objective and Approach

The objective of this paper is to analyze the changing dynamics and the discarded relationships in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Wada Trilogy*. The paper will bring forth the actual demeanor of the familial relationships and how far it conforms to our existing social framework.

Changing Dynamics and Discorded Familial Alliance in the *Wada Trilogy*.

The *Wada Trilogy* is a set of three works of Mahesh Elkunchwar namely *Old Stone Mansion*, *Pond*, and *Apocalypse*. The story revolves around the *Deshpandes* of Dharanagaon, who was once the highly respectable and royal family of the village but now financially unstable and finding it difficult to make ends meet. It is the story of a family from riches to rags who after spending an era of magnanimity and supremacy are compelled to live with the vicissitudes of life. And besides the ebbs and flows, the dynamics of relationships change. Degenerating relationships are the core of the trilogy where relationships are getting strained and arduous to maintain. Even the last rites of the father become troublesome for his children. The character of *Dad* perpetually reminds us of the neglected old-aged people of our society. They are often disregarded and ignored because they have reached a point in life where families see them as vain and worthless. In *Old Stone Mansion* while talking about *Dadi*, *Vahini* effortlessly says;

'Nobody should live this long, the pest.'(*Collected Plays* 167)^v

The dialogue by *Vahini* is the clear manifestation of their blatant disregard for *Dadi*, for the fact that she is old and completely dependent on the family for her needs. Unfortunately, our society has degenerated to the extent of losing respect for its elders. We are turning inconsiderate and selfish. We sermonize traditions, our values, and principles unrelentingly, but we often consign to oblivion when need to practice. We seem to forget that old age is the final stage of the normal life span and almost everyone has to face it. And this appears as the common predicament in today's familial system. And this has been signified through the character of *Dadi* in the play. She too would have had an important place in the

family when her husband was alive and she would be capable of carrying out her duties. But old age led her to such vulnerability.

The play brings forth the narrative of patriarchy and women's subjugation in the family and society. And the various consequences of patriarchy that a woman faces throughout her life, and its ramifications on the relationships in the family. While in conversation with *Sudhir*, *Prabhas* says

'...it's not even five days since Tatyaji died. Five days. And Vahini has changed already. The house keys moved instantly into her keep. And Aai went instantly into the shadows of the backroom. When Tatyaji was alive, you couldn't hear Vahini's footfall on the verandah. But within five days her orders are heard way outside the Wada.' (Collected Plays 141)^{vi}

It ciphers the fact that in the times Tatyaji was alive it was he and his wife who dominated the house, firstly because he was the eldest and secondly because he was the one who owned the house. And after him, the possession passed on to the next generation. A peep into the patriarchal mindset of the family is discerned where the wife enjoys the dominions and glories until the husband is alive. She is edged out the moment she is widowed. Patriarchy, like any other traditional Indian family, is deeply entrenched in the *Deshpande* family. And the effects of patriarchy could be seen through the plight of women characters in the play. They do not have a voice of their own. They follow what their husbands say. The character of *Prabha*, who is the only sister of three brothers, becomes a victim of such patriarchal society where her whole life is ruined because firstly her father and then her brothers never allowed her to study and attain education. She is left at the mercy of life that led to her frightful death. Not only *Prabha* this culture of subjugation had been inherent in the *Deshpande* family since always. Aai says:

'...is sorrow something you show others? You keep to yourself. If it gets too unbearable, there are enough dark rooms in this Wada. You go there and let the tears flow quietly. That's what all the Deshpande women have done.' (Collected Plays 181).^{vii}

This presents the grim situation of women in the family. There is an interminable sense of loneliness amongst the women characters where they could not even express their feelings and sorrows. They are supposed to do the household chores and comply with the men of the family. Their voices are subdued and their existence negligible. And silence and powerlessness often go hand in hand. So the women are extremely ineffectual and passive observers.

Money, power, and authority always go conjointly. The *Deshpande* family was respected and held dignity in the village when they had money. But with time they underwent a financial crisis and lost their veneration in the eyes of villagers. Not only this money also holds an important position in the family system where one with the money is revered and holds authority. *Chandu Kaka*, though not seen much in the first and second part of the trilogy, remains a very important character throughout. He is one of the sons of *Tatyaji* and

brother of *Bhaskar* and *Sudhir*. But he lives a very impoverished life as he is neither educated nor has money of his own. And so is not much regarded by the other members of the family. Because relationships nowadays are often weighed in monetary terms. In a family, the one with the money has a say in family decisions, and the story of *Wada* is no different. The brothers who earn are supposed to be the decision-makers and the characters like *Chandu Kaka*, *Prabha*, and the other women characters of the family who do not earn themselves are often disdained and do not have the right to make their own life decisions. The play puts forth as to how money could affect relationships. Nowhere in the play we see genuine love and care amongst brothers but just the pretense of it in order to maintain relationships. There is a horrid picture of familial structure manifested in the play that is formed and positioned on monetary terms. Even the mother-son relationship has been portrayed in grim shades. *Aai* herself accepts that the situations are now different than before *Tatyaji*'s death. She accepts that she is not the owner now, because her husband is not alive and that everything belongs to her sons and their families. On the other hand, the sons do not care much for the mother as is revealed in *Prabha*'s conversation with *Aai* when she says;

'...They are putting up with you now because you work. What will you do when you're worn out? Those two cannot see beyond their wives and children.' (Collected Plays 182)^{viii}

Those who have money are yearning for more and those who have nothing are in continuous destitution. Though they belong to the same family, money makes them morally and ethically blind. The brothers *Bhaskar* and *Sudhir* could not feel the pain and loneliness the younger brother *Chandu* goes through. They have become so greedy and the want for more has led them blind towards the distressing condition of their sister *Prabha*. The play acknowledges the degenerating relationships of our age.

But the bond between *Parag* and *Abhay* seems very genuine and the respect and concern that they hold for each other represent a typical Indian culture. *Parag*, the son of *Bhaskar* and *Vahini* and *Abhay*, the only son of *Sudhir* and *Anjali* are cousins. They spent their childhood together and were very fond of each other. Later on, *Abhay* moved to Bombay and *Parag* stayed back in the village. *Parag* too wanted to go to Bombay and achieve something in life, but somehow his uncle *Sudhir* didn't take him, and for which he remained angry with him throughout. When *Abhay* visits the village after a long time, *Parag* shows some resentments but very soon they conciliate back. Through their conversations, it is revealed that *Parag* admires and appreciates *Abhay*'s achievements, and *Abhay* on the other hand respects him no less. *Abhay* despite living in Bombay and America does not get a sense of home anywhere. He appears restless and in continuous search of his roots, his identity, and a place to call his home. After leaving his home in the village he imbibes a sense of rootlessness that's traumatic for him. He says;

'...People like me who've uprooted themselves can't put down roots too easily there. We are in a strange situation. In a way, we belong, in a way we don't. It gets pretty lonely at times...' (Collected Plays 235)^{ix}

Through character of *Abhay*, the significance of human relationships for the realization of individual identity is exquisitely manifested. Relationships give a sense of rootedness and belonging to the individual and when relationships are lost it leaves a sense of abandonment and desertion and leaves a person bereft. And that happens with *Abhay*. No matter how much time passes, how many grudges we hold on to but the support of family gives a sense of strength and security that we as humans strive for. Our relationship with our roots offers us our identity. The domains of interpersonal alliances helps in exploration of identity.(Jhingon 14).^x

The parent-child relationship portrayal is very connatural in the play. We often see the relationship between parents and children gets complicated with time. As the children grow up, a sense of detachment and dissociation comes between them. They form a certain emotional gap as they could not express themselves overtly. The lack of communication has been a major cause of estrangement and gaping interpersonal and familial relationships. The same is the situation in the play, where the exact nature of their relationship is quite ununderstandable. *Bhaskar* criticizes *Parag* for his wrong ways and attitudes, but he remains silent about the business that *Parag* is involved in. *Anjali* and *Sudhir* remain worried for *Abhay* as they are unsure of what he wants from his life. And *Abhay* on the other hand feels lonely even when he lives with his parents in Bombay. He couldn't convey his worries, emotions, and aspirations to his parents. He never told them what he wanted in life. He planned to go to America but didn't even ask them once. Even his parents could sense the distance that hails between them. *Anjali* while talking to *Sudhir* says;

'...what did you do except nag and pressurize him with what we've done this and we've done that for you? He is what he is. But we have been utterly useless parents. That's for sure...'(Collected Plays244)^{xi}

Apart from human relationships we also come across the case of human-material relationships in the play. Through the character of *Abhay* and *Parag* and their relationship with *Wada* and the village, the play uncovers the significance of human-material relationships which appears to be a very significant aspect of one's existence and identity. Feelings of ownership can develop towards both tangible and intangible entities serve to shape the individuality and effect the attitude of the person involved. (Belk).^{xii}*Abhay* time and again mentions his restlessness and the existential dilemma of finding a place he could call home. This becomes very significant in the third part of the trilogy named *Apocalypse* where he comes back to the village in search of peace and identity. But there he finds the village in a destitute state witnessing severe drought. He asks *Parag* as to why he didn't leave the village and moved to another place. To this *Para* replies;

'...I can't tear myself away from this village, Abhay. You'll ask what there is in it to hold me. Even I can't say for sure... This was the village that had dandled me, carried me on hip, shoulder, and head- the son of the Deshpandes... All the same, these people had filled my

childhood with love and pampering... They are all gone one by one. Only a few remains. And as long as they remain, I will remain here...'(Collected Plays 270)^{xiii}

Human beings develop a sense of intimacy not only with the people around but even with their externalities and surroundings and establish a sense of identity through it. We get a sense of attachment and belonging even with the non-living things around us. People are often seen unwilling to leave their native home and place and migrate to other places. Because the place gives a sense of rootedness and a sense of belonging that plays a major role in defining our identity. The relationship that one holds with the native home strengthens the cultural identity and contributes to a positive self-concept. And that's the reason the migrants and expatriates who move to other places come across a sense of "crisis of home" and under perils of loss of identity and identity crisis. And so is the case with *Parag and Abhay*. *Parag* even though living in a destitute state of the village, leads a gratifying life because a sense of home and belonging provides him strength whereas *Abhay* who lives a comfortable life abroad remains troubled and restless because he finds no place to call his home.

The relationship between *Vahini* and *Anjali* is quite intriguing. Though they are sisters-in-law, they share a very congenial relationship. Even though *Parag* holds grudges against his uncle *Sudhir*, but he too regards his aunt. Generally, we find a troublesome bond between sisters-in-law in our society, but the play presents this alliance in a very positive light. There are many instances in the play where the brothers *Bhaskar* and *Sudhir* go against each other, but we do not see any resentments between *Vahini* and *Anjali*.

A complex structure of relationships has been depicted in Elkunchwar's trilogy where the nature of the relationship that each one of the characters holds with the other is different and dissimilar. The brotherly bond that *Bhaskar* and *Sudhir* have is different from the bond of *Parag* and *Abhay*. Even the brothers from the same mother *Bhaskar*, *Sudhir*, and *Chandu Kaka* hold a different bond with each other, where the one with the lower economic status is turned a blind eye on. The playwright has not even once tried an unrealistic character portrayal, he presented whatever he saw and experienced being a member of such society. There is an exquisite representation of different colors of familial relationships that seems very genuine and actual, and something we could witness and discern around.

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