

**Representation of the Social Issues in Newly Independent India: A Study of Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure*.**

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**Abstract**

Post colonial India left its citizens with numerous socio-economic and political challenges to deal with. From villages to towns, people were suffering from immense poverty and hardships, the economy was hit hard and people were dying of starvation. The traditional family structure was at the verge of collapse and the system of joint family was getting replaced by small and nuclear families with the changed gender roles. In India, pre and post independence, the concept of woman, was drawn from the scriptures and mythologies and modelled on women like Savitri and Sita, thus, working outside their traditional domains had no place in the typical patriarchal society hitherto but post independence women, encouraged by Indian constitution, education and reformists, strengthened their voice for equal rights and unbiased working opportunities. In such a volatile situation the newly formed government was still trying to establish itself and it did not have any concrete solution to the majority of the problems being faced. This research paper endeavors to explicate the emerging social issues in *Halfway House* the English translation of an iconoclastic work of Hindi drama *Adhe Adhure* by Mohan Rakesh. This play meticulously characterises the challenges and the problems of a middle class family struggling to maintain a balance between the traditional and modern values in post colonial India. Through this study an attempt has been made

to delve deep into the issues and challenges faced by people in postcolonial India as a result of significant structural changes that happened in the society and which undermined the established social institutions and subverted the traditional social norms. The paper also highlights the theme of economic instability and the issues associated with it along with an analysis of the theme of absurdity of over ambitiousness and modernity.

*Key words:* Challenges, Family, Absurdity, Modernity, Patriarchy.

## **Introduction**

The process of colonialism is as old as 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, European colonization in the 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 cultures by declaring them as uncivilized and outdated. The natives were strategically hegemonised and exploited in all possible manners. The exchange between the colonisers and the colonised was traumatic for the invaded, everywhere. Pramod K. Nayyar (2019) 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 of discipline. It is done by making translations, commentaries and academic studies" (p. 6). Ania Loomba (2005), a renowned name in Postcolonial studies writes in her book *Colonialism and Post-colonialism*, "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" (p. 7). India became a colony of Britain in the eighteenth century A.D. and finally got independence in the 20th century on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947

after a long history of struggle and sacrifices. This colonial period of two centuries has impacted Indians in a complex way and from multiple facets. Politically, and geographically the 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 which's repercussions are felt till this date. Bipin Chandra (2008), a well-known historian while discussing the consequences which emerged after Independence of India in his book *India Since Independence* states:

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. (p. 83)

Immediate problem that people experienced after the partition was the influx of millions of refugees from the newly created nation Pakistan to India. Government had limited resources at its disposal to compensate the six million homeless migrants who had lost everything they owned. The efforts for the rehabilitation could not bear any significant results and the exodus of Hindus from East Bengal continued for years even after the partition. Bipin Chandra (2008) further comments in the same book:

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. (p. 85)

Along with the influx of refugees across the border there had been a constant movement of population from villages to towns. This increasing shift of the people from rural to urban cities led to many challenges like unemployment, poverty, corruption, slums and pollution in an already bowed nation. Ram Ahuja (1992) in his book *Social Problems in India* 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. (p. 245)

This change of attitudes and belief system among the various social groups led to a phase of transformation which was characterised by a shift to western and capitalist way of living and thinking. Indian culture has a history of a joint family system in which several generations live together under one roof and fed from one kitchen. Joint family as a social institution provided a platform to its members to strengthen and better manage their socio-political and economic affairs. The patriarchal extended family system shaped traditional Indian communities. In a traditional joint family the male head of the family and his wife, their sons and their wives, their grandsons, their wives and children, lived in one household and run the shared family farm. The situation that emerged post independence was influenced by the British education, law, politics and social reform which ultimately led to urbanization, capitalisation and westernization and consequently compressed this social institution called joint family. Constantly growing needs, expenditure and the altered circumstances forced both husband and wife to go out and earn to run the household and that resulted in the establishment of a new trend in society. Based on mythic and scriptural women like Sita and Savitri women in Indian society have been described as symbol of purity, devotion and spirituality, respected as godly on one hand and on the other, treated as weak, dependents on the protection provided by man. Rama Mehta (1970) a sociologist, highlights the plight of women:

There is a recorded evidence to show that the Hindu woman was not always without rights nor constantly in subjection. There is, however, greater evidence to show that the contrary was true; for many centuries her position continued to be one in which she did not have either legal or social rights to make her independent of the family into which she was born or married. (p. 16)

Under the British imperial power India got exposed to western philosophies, Indian reformers and the reformist movements associated with them like that of Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Sarasvati, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Mahatama Gandhi, Jyotiba Phule etc. In the twentieth century India, the effect of economic expansion, industrial towns triggered the population migration from rural territories to urban. This economic change resulted in the social change leading towards shift from joint families to nuclear

families, which were more mobile. The new nuclear families consist of two adult parents including a male and a female and their dependent children, living a comparatively mobile and independent life. Independent India and the Indian constitution liberated Indian women legally, by providing them equal rights as citizens. The constitution rejects the concept of women being weaker to their male counterparts, in principle. In post independence India, education and economic independence provided strong footing to modern educated women. This was purely a new trend following independence of the country and was seen as a major transformation in the gender roles of the members of the society. Similarly, there was a drastic change, by default, in the field of art and literature with new subject matter and issues of social reality as the new literary prism. Although the country gained freedom from its political slavery it still struggled to improve the socio-economic condition of its citizens. This was the time when Indian literature, especially the plays and novels, contributed a lot in highlighting the social-economic problems among the masses. The tradition of writing historical and anti-British plays was soon replaced by the social plays. Commenting upon this aspect of Indian literature written in Hindi, renowned critic and writer Diana Dimitrova remarks that this tendency of writing social in plays among Indian writers after the independence was developed on western tradition. She writes:

The influence of western drama grew and the social problem plays 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. ( Diana, 2004, p. 365)

Various writer who wrote during this period of post independence dexterously utilised the power of dramatic craft in illustrating the social and psychological issues faced by the people. "The preoccupation with social issues led in turn to a new 'rebellion' in the 1960's and a new shift in the subject matter" (Diana, 2004, p. 12). Mohan Rakesh played an important role in highlighting such social issues with his dramatic insights and skilful characterisation presented through his plays.

### **Analysis of the play**

*Halfway House* the play undertaken for study is a translated version of Mohan Rakesh's Hindi drama *Adhe Adhure* written in 1968 after two decades of India's independence and first performed

in March 1969. The translation of the original text is done by Bindu Batra and it is taken as the primary source for the current exegesis. In this seminal work Mohan Rakesh highlights the problems that emerged in the urban society of post-independence India. It was a challenge for the middle class society to stay united and earn livelihood as socio-economic circumstances were constantly challenging that led to rupture in the traditional family setup. Dharwadker and Bhargava (2008) in their article “Mohan Rakesh, Modernism and the Postcolonial Present” remark:

*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 (p. 139).

Further, they 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” (Dharwadker and Bhargava, 2008, as cited in Shivpuri, 2003, p. 154). At the very beginning of the play the dramatist questions man-woman relationship and gender roles in a contemporary middle class Indian society. Structurally, the play is not divided in acts and only two long episodes appear with an interval between them. The play opens in a house of the unnamed “man number one” and “woman” with the entry of a man in black suit who also serves as the narrator of the play. In the prologue itself, the theme of exploration of identity is introduced when “men in black” exclaims “who am I” (Mohan, 2013, p. 2)? He calls himself ‘amorphous’ and ‘undefined’ to explain his position and the challenges he was facing to exhibit his identity in contemporary society. Furthermore, pessimism and absurdity again can be traced in the comments of the narrator in Prologue when he asserts that no matter what the circumstances and consequences were, the search for identity would always be continued as an absurd, undefined and irrational act. he maintains that there is nothing like separate individual identity and “... 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” (Mohan, 2013, p. 5). Further, this notion of identity and meaninglessness can be best understood through the character of the Savitri who looks to fulfil the void and motive in her married life. She asks “why does one get married? In order to fulfil a need... an inner...void, if you like; to be self-sufficient... complete” (Mohan, 2013, p. 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 in the society. Dilip Kumar Basu (2013) editor of the *Halfway House* 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.” (p. iv). Mahendranath, the husband of Savitri, is also in the search of re-establishing his lost identity by making an attempt to establish his business in partnership with his friend Juneja. He had been confined in the four walls of his house and his position of not earning a penny has 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. He admits “... silent acceptance, perpetual snubs, constant insults, is all that I deserve after so many years” (Mohan, 2013, p. 26). The loss of control in the family hurts his ego and he does not want to be like “only as a stamp of respectability to be used only when the need arises” (Mohan, 2013, p. 27). The constant accusation of being indolent in the home by wife developed an 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, where individual is meaningful only if he is meaningfully monetarily. He being unemployed, without economic base, fails to understand Savitri, his wife. He gives more significance to his friends than his wife. He is dependent on his friends’ advice on every matter as he can not share himself with his wife, on whom he is financially dependent. Being jobless he feels suffocated and blames his wife for his downfall. He accepts his professional defeat and surrenders to feel powerless after having given power to his wife, the modern woman, the breadwinner.

In the Post-Colonial, industrialised, urbanised and capitalised period the family institution got a huge setback when the classical joint family structure was compressed into nuclear families. Mahendranath and Savitri had a nuclear family and this family structure was also different in the sense that the established gender roles in the society were reversed there. Mother took the onus to earn the bread for the home and father had to spent the whole day sitting idle at home, without any employment. Thus in a typical patriarchal society this act broke the stereotype and the trend was unexpected, socially shameful and indigestive to the male members of the society. Rakesh Mohan through his art of characterisation meticulously exhibits that these reversed gender roles became the cause of scuffle in the family as the plot reveals that Savitri does not like Mahendranath sitting idle at home and this was the reason they were always at odds 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 the burden of the family can be lightened but nothing changes. Kinni, the little girl's feelings and emotions are also not taken into consideration, and she becomes unruly with passage of time. She is portrayed as unmannered with no sense of talking to elders. The parents of others' in the society accuse her for indulging their children to talk nonsense. These accusations and unhealthy climate at home has made her life disturbed and full of frustration. She finds no meaning in her life. The only son of this nuclear family is Ashok, who is irresponsible and nonserious and never pays any heed to the advice of his mother. He would rather flee away from home than to find a job that can lessen the burden of his mother, the only bread earner in the family. The elder daughter, Binni, has married early against the wishes of her family. Her marriage is unsuccessful and thus she has not been happy with her husband and has left him for her parental home. Commenting upon the reversal of gender roles in *Adhe Adhure*, Dharwadkar and Bhargava (2008) in their research paper "Mohan Rakesh, Modernism, and the Postcolonial Present" maintain 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." (p. 159)

The playwright through the character of the Savitri has depicted the women of post-independence India. These women are depicted as bold, ambitious and a responsible persons in such an unstable time. Despite having an insignificant position in the office Savitri manages to invite her boss at home so that her only son can have some employment. Her husband also turns out to be a failure, both as a husband as well as a businessman. This 'new woman' of modern age is rebellious one



who wants to live life on her own terms and conditions and create a distinguished identity of her own rather than be known by the name of her husband. This is evident in the text where on being called Mahendranath's wife by her husband's friend, this is how Savitri registers her concern:

Don't call me that [a wife] - Mahendra is also a man, with a family ... a fact that those who were close to him never liked from the start... That same Mahendra who smiles meekly among his friends when he comes home. One never knows when he may scratch one's eyes out or drink one's life-blood! One day he makes a bonfire of his clothes in anger. Another day he sits on my chest and bangs my head against the floor. 'Tell me whether you'll come with me or not? Whether you'll do all I say or not?' But I still don't do what he wants. I still don't conform. I hate all this - I hate it. I want . . . a man, not just a miserable . . . hanger-on! Sometimes I try to wench my tortured being away from him. There was even a time when I tried to turn to him into a man. But if my efforts ever began to bear fruit, his friends started pitying him. 'Savitri is leading Mahendra by the nose!' 'Savitri has broken him ... he is no longer a man.' Just a puppet ... Poor Mahendra! (Mohan, 2013, p. 2)

Finally, as she realises that her goals and aspirations are at risk, she once again plans to enter into a new relationship with her old friend, Jagmohan. But this also fails. He too can not fulfill her expectations and she decides 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 being courageous, ambitious, hardworking and responsible, can not think of herself getting a reasonable job. She is so much hegemonised by the orthodox patriarchal society that she believes that all high standard and respectable jobs are meant for males only. She seeks exceptional qualities in male members around her, be it her son, her husband, her boss, her lover or her son-in-law. She is constantly in search of imaginary complete man, and slowly she goes away from her husband, Mahendranath to Juneja, Manoj, Singhanian, Jagmohan etc., but does not get that complete man anywhere. Instead, she finds halfness all around in all men, and senses her halfness too. She can not convert her halfness with any of these men, even outside her marriage. Mohan Rakesh, through this drama has very skilfully highlighted the fact that for humans, completeness is myth, a mirage, which can be chased but can never be achieved. In order to enjoy one's life one has to accept this halfness or emptiness and in

order to be peaceful one has to learn to share, care, sympathise and perform with honesty and hope. But, Savitri in order to fill her halfness keeps going to different men, one after another, and when she fails, she grunts, "Every one of you ... all alike! Exactly the same. Different masks, but the face ... the same wretched face" (Mohan, 2013, p. 225).

Through Savitri's character the dramatist has brought forth the life of modern Indian women who still face umpteen challenges due to their gender. Although the problems of women are central to the play, their ambition and transition to modern culture inspired by the western school of culture poses a threat to overall structure of family and further to the society. Diana Dimitrova (2004) writes in this regard:

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. (p. 387)

It is quite evident from the analysis of the primary text that post independence India had multi-faceted social issues to face at individual and family level. The play pointedly showcases the effect of independence, constitution, education, employment, nuclear family on the traditional gender roles, and, in a realistic depiction proves that complete completeness is a myth and it is wise to accept one's halfness and learn to face the emerging social challenges as family on the traditional principles of mutual respect, sharing, caring, controlling and sympathising. In us, as a reader or audience of this classic drama, each Mahendranath can counter his completeness with the help of his Savitri and each Savitri can counter her emptiness with the help of Mahendranath.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussion it may be drawn that *Halfway House* does justice to represent actual circumstances of the Post-Independent Indian society, particularly the traditional middle class families, which had newly been compressed into nuclear families, being more mobile and congenial to emerging socioeconomic conditions. The dramatist through varied thematic concerns provides deep insight into these newly emerging challenges and problems in contemporary society. The skillful portrayal of the characters themselves speaks about unbalanced political structure and collapsed economic conditions and its effect on society at individual and family level. The reversal

of gender roles and the issues associated with it have been beautifully presented by the playwright. The change in the institution of family from joint to nuclear can be seen through the family of Savitri. Failed business attempts of Mahendranath portrays the cold and helpless attitude of the government of the time towards small businessmen. Unlike today's businessmen they had no encouragement in the form of government incentives like easy interest free loans and other financial packages for the people living below poverty line. Thus, we can conclude that Mohan Rakesh through this iconoclastic work of art established a new trend in Hindi drama through which he mirrored the real socioeconomic issues which were not represented appropriately earlier. The play remains as classic document that dared to address the social issues when every dramatist was addressing the colonial. The play is immortal as a classic document offering the way forward to deal with such universal social challenges and individual halfness encountered universally.

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