ALCHEMY OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: DESIRE, REVOLT AND VIOLENCE IN MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR’S SELECT PLAYS

I. Introduction:

The literary genre drama has been effective means to translate abstract human feeling, imagination into action. It has additional benefits of being effective since it is constructed with specific structure and can be performed on the stage thus bringing life to the thoughts, feeling, actions being narrated. The history of drama is as old as the history of literature itself. From ancient Greek literature to the present, the writing of drama has undergone immense change. In the beginning it was produced with the sole aim of entertainment of people. Gradually it became the means to voice the contemporary concerns with specific aim. It happened not only in structure of stage, subject of the play, style of presentation but also in the form and structure of the play itself. The aim of all the plays in all ages, of course, was to bring about the imagination and feeling in the form of writing and performance. The genre attempts to investigate the complexity of human relations and conflict, emphasizing the existence of vanity of human desires, its production, consequences on life, etc.

Human civilization is unending process of change and all changes are not good enough to welcome. More we have the technological advancements, the more we have challenges to face complex nature of the change in almost every area of life. Today there is a need to look into the impact of the changed ways of living and ‘seeing’.
Drama has a glorious history and has gone through tremendous change. It always attempts to offer commentary on life and there can scarcely be any human activity that is not touched upon. It frequently deals with the popular themes like love, hatred, family affairs, politics, social problems, history, nationalism, struggle against slavery of various kind, etc.

In country like India, the post independence era and especially the dawn of twenty first century saw very promising, bold, innovative, controversial issues like gay/lesbian relationships, incest, child abuse, drama of drama, violence, changing form of love, marriages, family, becoming the subject of the plays with their effective presentation on the stage. Mahesh Dattani, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, C.T. Khanolkar, etc. very effectively did the work of play writing with innovation on technical and thematic levels.

The present work focused on the major areas of human relations in the selected plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar, who very aptly deals with various subjects like desire, violence, revolt, death and man-woman relationship, village culture, etc. His writing is seen as mirror of post colonial rural India and the way life underwent transformation in rural and urban areas in Maharashtra. However the present work mainly investigates the themes like desire, revolt and violence in select plays as treated by the dramatist.

Garbo, Yatanaghar, Desire in the Rocks (Vasanakand), Reflection (Pratibimb), An Actor Exists (Eka Natacha Mrityu), Holi, Flower of Blood (Raktpushp), As One Discadeth Old Clothes... (Wasana Jeernani), Autobiography (Atmacharitra), Party, Old Stone Mansion (Wada Chirebandi), Pond (Magna Talyakathi) and Apocalypse (Yugant) are the major plays which are analyzed in the chapters.
II. Chapter-wise Brief Account:

The first chapter gives a brief outline of the research work. It also deals with the historical survey of the treatment to the thematic concerns in literature. It poses the variety of presentation of the themes and indicates the significance of the study. The aspects are the integral part of the work. Therefore, the opening chapter tries to give the entire general background about the work. It also offers author’s biographical details, contribution and style.

The first chapter however also provides the general introduction to the issues like desire, revolt and violence with references from the critical texts of the same genre and critical commentary from the critical writings of critics. The introductory part, besides giving the general introduction of the drama in general and Indian drama in particular, also attempts to present the evolution, experiment, treatment, use and abuse of the thematic concerns like desire, revolt and violence in the contemporary Indian drama as well as in Marathi drama writings.

The Second chapter investigates the various types of desires which reflect through love, incest, etc. It offers critical analyses with structural approach. In his plays, Mahesh Elkunchwar is largely influenced by certain philosophical thinking about the presentation of human nature on the stage. Death, sexuality, absurdity and vanity of human wishes are some of the most prominent themes he pays more attention to. Desire formulates the core of almost every living thing on the planet. His presentation of desire on the stage appears to be exhibiting the characteristics like bringing about the representation of certain ways in which it could best be expressed and secondly it is on the part of the playwright to
understand the nature of the human relationship. It is almost impossible to trace totality of impact on Elkunchwar’s writings.

However his initial writing inspiration is related to the writing style of the playwrights like Eugene O’Neill and Marathi playwright like Vijay Tendulkar. Impressionism and absurdity remain the characteristics of his plays as far as the plays that depict desire in man-woman relationship. Such plays oddly may include Garbo, Desire in the Rocks, Autobiography, Flower of Bood, Party, Holi, As One Discardeth Old Clothes ..., and Reflection. However the plays represent ethos that could be identified as the true picture of Indian culture. Writers like Satish Alekar and Vijay Tendulkar attempted depiction of desire in their plays and succeeded in making the groundbreaking revelations of Indian culture. Their plays like Sakharam Binder, Vultures, Ghashiram Kotwal, Baby, Silence! The Court is in Session, Deluge, Begum Barve are some of the plays that deal with the theme. The main difference that lies in the each writer’s writing is the spacio-temporal conditions that prevails the writings along with the other contributing factors.

There are two ways of approaching the theme of desire in literature. One can take the moments of desire and analyze its connection with the immediate factors that influence it along with their contexts and their connection with psychological orientations and secondly one can probe into the issue of desire finding out its broader sociological, political and economical perspectives originating from certain ideological constructions. This chapter however attempts to evaluate the issue of desire on the above mentioned ways.
The third chapter deals with the theme of revolt in the select plays. It investigates the complex nature of revolt, its reasons and consequences by offering evidences from the text. Drama is one of the most significant and effective form of writing that has proved many times fruitful in expressing and achieving its impact on society. It has been effective in conveying the message it wants, due to the nature of the presentation in dialogic form and more importantly the facility and advantage of dramatic presentation on the stage. The revolt in the dramatic writings of Elkunchwar, exhibits two kinds of tendencies. One is that of the selection of subject matter for his writing which predominantly characterizes the expression of feelings that has been tabooed and prohibited. Secondly his writings in their totality are a form revolt as compared against the backdrop of the Marathi dramatic writings before 1960s.

The fourth chapter studies the treatment of the theme of violence in the plays. Violence is one of the vital issues Elkunchwar seems to give special treatment in his plays. Unlike Tendulkar, Elkunchwar does not offer more explicit space to violence. However violence appears at juncture when it is sought as the culmination and outcome of crisis of conflict of human issues. Ending of the plays like *Desire in the Rocks, Garbo, Sultan, Party, Holi*, are of violent nature. Violence takes place in the plays in the form of murder, suicide, torture and humiliation.

In this chapter attempts are made to examine the depiction of violent acts of the characters in the plays in two ways. The first way is to evaluate the performance of the violence on the stage and its impact on the audience. The mechanism and the scheme of presentation of the violence on the stage have a significant role to play in Elkunchwar’s plays. Secondly the analysis of the cruelty enacted by the characters is sought in
contextual references. The violence exhibited in the plays has its relation with sociological, psychological, cultural background of the characters.

In the fifth chapter, the conclusions based on the previous chapters are discussed and attempts are made to pose the interconnections of the themes and relevance and draw findings of the research.

The following are few of the major findings of the present study:

i. The role played by ideology in making the sexuality a taboo resulted negatively especially in the context of women who for ages suffered from the evils of patriarchy. Since the Vedic period in India, there had been many customs and traditions that were followed without any interrogation of them. Silence on the issue of sexuality of one of them. Those who tried to violate the silence became the target of conservatism. Lalita in Desire in the Rocks and Anand in Holi become the victim of wrath of society for going against the social norms of accepted sexuality.

ii. The locus of human desire at times becomes a more difficult thing to trace. It is not the only matter that one cannot easily find out and identify the origins of desires of a person as one does not always possess sufficient knowledge of the person. Psychoanalysts require demand information about the persons’ childhood memories, dreams, habits, interests and so on, for a proper analysis. A piece of writing like that of a play does not always have a space to be occupied with necessary information. This inability is one side of the problem. The difficulty
becomes graver with the understanding that a person most of the time does not understand motives of his or her own desires. It falls beyond his/her area of cognition and fails to recognize in the first place how his/her desires for specific object, person or thing, are generated. Certain desires however could be recognized very easily as the result of certain circumstances, basic needs and those that often become the matter of familiarity in the course of time. The existence of such desires could be recognized as natural and it could be anticipated. In the case of sexual desire however the nature of the matter becomes rather uncertain.

iii. There are two things that happen in process of realizing a desire by a tormented person like Padma. First the person tends to seek immediate happiness out of the direct way of receiving pleasure. It could be for Padma from *Flower of Blood* by cleaning the room of Raja or just lying down on his bed keeping the lights off. Though it is momentarily, such ways are sought in order to get rid of the pressure building up in one’s mind. There remains a very little time to think logically and plan systematically before one act to avoid the growing complexity of web of thinking about certain matter at hand. Secondly, it is the burden of realization that people around one, have noticed one doing the crazy thing. In case of Padma, it is wearing the sari and writing the letters, leave her beyond explanation. This remains in mind and bring about feeling of guilt making the person feel more depressed. But what keep this complex play goes on moving is desire of human beings for something. The time when such desires die out completely, the human psychology becomes impossible to find comforts in normality of the world. Unlike Padma,
Lalita find her resolution of the complexity grown in her mind in suicide in *Desire in the Rocks*.

iv. The homosexual desire in the play like *Holi* could be analyzed with the help of the basic framework or western theories like that of Foucault bringing down the forces like patriarchy, power, knowledge, reason and religion. What makes the personal and contextual experience of the analyses altogether a different practice of realization of new notions that go into making the reality of experience of homosexuality in Indian context is the very framework of history, tradition, memory, culture and social norms that underlie the life style of the people at a certain period of time. It involves the conscious acknowledgment to the issues like psychology, politics, economics, history, sociology and the process of cultural identification. And they are time specific and cannot always be isolated from its local and national relevance and significations.

v. In the play *As One Discardeth Old Clothes*..., Elkunchwar presents to us the last wishes of a person on deathbed who realizes the futility of man’s existence and the form of revolt he adopts is becoming one with God and at same time denying and breaking himself free from the relationship that he tried in vain throughout his life to bring a satisfactory meaning. In *Party* Elkunchwar reveals the psyche of middle class set of people who represent different profession in the society. He depicts the hypocrite nature of the people in their vanity of wishes and meaningless pursuit of popularity. The character of Amrit in the play represents the consciousness in the society that believes in working for social cause. He believes that the movement against social and political injustice could not be
defeated unless one brings about the revolt in the active form. He believes that the passive forms like that of writing and philosophizing are mere vain attempt of dreaming of the change.

vi. The inevitability of revolt by the youth is strengthened by the way the forces that straightway affect and disturb the youth in dominant manner. The discourse of power always looks after its sustenance and security. There are always two ways to bring about a change in any system. One is internally and the second is externally. One can bring changes in a system by becoming the part of it. When it is not possible to become the part of the system, the revolt becomes necessary to turn it topsy-turvy. But the superstructure does not however allow the possibility of revolt. The knowledge of this again turns the youth to despair. It is the reason why Ranjit says that he “feels like burning all the fucking buildings down!” (Elkunchwar 20). The treatment they give to Anand as punishment for revealing their names to the Principal or lighting up holi fire by using the chair from the hostel recreation room has been symbolic of the revolt the students wish to bring out against the all the adverse conditions they wish to change and annihilate the evil practices of the system they cannot change.

vii. It is strangely true that practices like prostitution in society always relates themselves to the violent responses. And it is witnessed in almost all the cultures. In this reference Hobsbawn appears to be one more Marxist emphasizing the relationship between prostitution, infanticide, suicide, etc and the social and economical aspects. Hobsbawn and most of the above mentioned thinkers look at violence as not a mere act of aggression or force. It becomes essential on our part
to detect and analyze the whole mechanism that operates and ultimately leads to violence that could be categorized in various forms. It is to consider the phenomenon of violence is not a simple act of application of violent energy but its basics consist of the fundamentals of human nature in general. It is why Slovej Zizek writes in the introduction of his book *Violence*:

But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible “subjective” violence, violence performed by clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identity a violence that sustains our every effort to fight violence and to promote tolerance (Zizek 9).

viii. The role of language is significant in shaping the way we perceive the world and the reality of the world. In fact it is the language itself which is the medium through which every understanding is created and activated. Without the language we simply cease to exist on a certain level. The language is not self sufficient. It could be called as the mistake on the part of the thinkers who conceived language as “the medium of reconciliation and mediation of peaceful co-existence… In language, instead of exerting direct violence on each other, we are meant to debate, to exchange words, and such and exchange, even when its aggressive, presupposes a minimum recognition of the other” (Zizek 1). While making references to Jean-Marie Muller, Zizek mentions the two ways how renunciation of violence is sought as speaking is the foundation and structure of socialization that happens due to the renunciation of violence and even if it happens it happens
due to a radical perversion of humanity when “language gets infected by violence and it happens under the influence of contingent ‘pathological’ circumstances which distort the inherent logic of symbolic communication” (Zizek 2).