Abstract
EXISTENTIALISM IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF
MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR

Introduction:

Existentialism deals with problems related to concrete, eternal and contemporary human existence. Existentialists have often found their best mode of expression in drama, fiction, creative prose and poetry. In post-War Europe an entire dramatic movement, the Theatre of the Absurd, emerged primarily as a consequence of the existentialist double focus on absurd – man – in – an – absurd – human condition in the hostile environment and opposite atmosphere.

Existentialist literature tends to emphasize certain recurring themes; these themes are man alienated from an absurd world and the individual’s isolation and subjectivity. Existentialism expresses feelings of anxiety, anguish, despair and nausea. The existentialist writing show how the individual faces his own nothingness, or confronts his guilt as in plays like Garbo and Autobiography by Mahesh Elkunchwar. His assertion of personal freedom through irrevocable choice. Death consciousness is presented in plays like Reflection and Flower of Blood and the need to define oneself against it as the victim hero who creates his own values from within are also the themes of existentialist writers in which in Marathi Mahesh Elkunchwar the leading dramatist.

Mahesh Elkunchwar is a well known playwright in contemporary Marathi and Indian English Theatre. He has posed anxieties and situations in the Indian Theatre. His plays have the constantly recurring themes of the experience of human isolation and a search for positive value in life and human relationships. Elkunchwar describes his play writing as ‘rooted in his personal element.’ He is more interested in the individual’s problems, his inner life, and his anguish. The psyche of an unhappy and a disturbed person interests him more than the social problems.

Mahesh Elkunchwar is the author of fifteen full-length and one – act plays. Mahesh Elkunchwar, as an author, theorist, critic and polemist has been an influential figure in contemporary Indian theatre for the past three decades. His major plays include Garbo (2009), Desire in the Rocks (2009), Reflection (2009), Autobiography
Abstract


Mahaesh Elkunchwar received many awards for his outstanding contribution for creative writing. Nagbhushan Award (2010), Vishnudas Bhave Award (2013) and Anant Bhalerao Award (2012).

Research Review

In English very few research is done on works of Mahesh Elkunchwar. Mahesh Elkunchwar wrote his drama’s in Marathi. Many Marathi scholars pursued their studies on the creative works of Mahesh Elkunchwar. It is necessary to review research works carried out in Marathi his plays. Supriya Pendhari in his research thesis named ‘*Marathi Natyashrusttitil Vidroh aani Navata*’ explored how Vijay Tendulkar, C.T. Khanolkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar deviated their truack from traditional Marathi theatre. Their themes and techniques are quite different from their predecessors. She underlined importance of novelty in literature. Researcher shed light on impact of new philosophical trends and its impact on writers under study. She emphasized novelty in content / subject, novelty in language and novelty in form. There is reciprocal relationship between novelty and experimentation. Pendhari highlights that according to changing contemporary realities how these writers changed their perspectives towards life.

*Elkunchwaranchi Natyashruti* by Sandhya Amrutye is one of the best research books in Marathi on Mahesh Elkunchwar. In this research book she has elaborately discussed on existential consciousness and concept of sin in the plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar. She sheds light on the philosophical nature of his plays. Elkunchwar’s play writing is his journey towards self – search and introspection. She underlines the necessity of human relations in life. It is a travel from valuelessness consciousness of life to everlasting consciousness of moral values. It is journey from self consciousness to self – awareness.

*Shodh Elkunchwaranchya Natyakrutincha* is very important book by Sanjay Arwikar. It gives complete understanding of Mahesh Elkunchwar’s dramatic world. In this book Sanjay Aarwikar searches for inner consciousness of dramatists and its impact on his creative process. He explains various metaphors used by playwriter to
presenter his world view. 'Darkness', 'Games', 'Reflection', these and such metaphors he elaborately discussed in this book. 'Search of Truth' is a prominent feature of existentialist literature. Aarwikar illustrated theme of 'Search of Truth' and 'Perception of Life' in this book. He dealt with Party, Autobiography, Reflection, As One Discardth Old Clothes and presented comprehensive thoughts on themes and techniques in this book. This book helped us to understand dramatic works of Mahesh Elkunchwar in new perception. 'Search of Truth', 'Perception of Life' and nerve shattering experiences these themes helped us to understand these dramas according to our perspective of research.

Natakkar Mahesh Elkunchwar by Kamlesh is a major book in which he elaborately discussed nature, direction and vision seen in one act plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar. Kamlesh is an authority over Mahesh Elkunchwar, in this book he extensively studied major plays like Old Stone Mansion, Garbo, Reflection, Autobiography, Party and Desire in the Rocks.

Makrand Sathe wrote two volumes of 'Marathi Rangbhoomichya Tees Ratri' in these two books he elaborated and minutely studied many major play writers in Marathi. His book deals with social – political history of Marathi Theater.

Sanjay Aarwikar wrote 'Nawya Awkashatil ANandyatri' it highlight uniqueness and novelty in the plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar. He made Elkunchwar to speak about creativity and experimental theatre.

**Primacy Sources**

*Garbo* (2009),

*Desire in the Rocks* (2009),

*Reflection* (2009),

*Autobiography* (2011),

*Flower of Blood* (2011),

*Party* (2011)
Chapter Scheme

The present thesis is divided under the following six chapters.

Chapter One — Existentialism and Contemporary Marathi Theatre.

Chapter Two — Sexual Frustration and Sense of Loss in Garbo

Chapter Three — Artistic Failure in Desire in the Rocks

Chapter Four — Loss of Existence and Sense of Disorientation in Reflection and Flower of Blood

Chapter Five — Moral Degradation and Search of Self - Consciousness in Party and Autobiography

Chapter Six — Summing Up

The study includes the above mentioned existentialist plays by Mahesh Elkunchwar.

Garbo

Elkunchwar’s Garbo is about the class of ‘young people’ and ‘lost generation’ who live in metropolis and carry different cultures, who feel the same frustration of shattered political dreams, the diffusion of mediocrity and the burden of inhibition as the post-independence euphoria dissipated into the air. In Garbo, Elkunchwar depicts the inner battles of these people. Sexuality is his major concern. The frustration, mediocrity, uncertainty are the existentialist elements as dramatically presented in Garbo.

Of the foursome Shrimant alone is the wealthiest person as his name suggests. There are three other characters who carry their roles in their names. The play opens deceptively with a scene of cynical camaraderie on a Sunday morning. This show of love, affection and friendship soon breaks into ‘bickering inevitably leading on to the theme of Garbo. All three of them invest in Garbo their particular desires and sexual fantasies. They are all involved with Garbo, whom Shrimant would like to treat...
Garbo as a 'sex machine'; Intuc considers Garbo as 'a challenge a living work of art, who 'grows older, but never stale even after fulfilling the need of all three of us, a part of her still remains untouched'. Pansy takes her to be a mother figure and a guardian deity. All the three hit out at one another and at Garbo too with bitter offensive banter and bite, trying to hold on to their private images of Garbo. Garbo in her turn too hits back from time to time, often out of extreme self contempt. His characters turn away from each other even as they desperately yearn to communicate. Restless in his search and unrelenting in his honesty, Elkunchwar stands unsurpassed in Modern Indian Theatre for his emotional sweep, intellectual rigour and subtlety of expression.

Desire in the Rocks

Elkunchwar in *Desire in the Rocks* illustrates the perverse and aberrant nature of the sexual forces that rise against the unjust, oppressive, repressive social norms internalized within the unconscious mind. The rebellious unconscious that ostensibly seeks liberation in the making of art remains inherently authoritarian. The woman remains in the site of exploitation and domination in both the cases. The fear from within the home that had been Lalita's fear earlier, now becomes fear from both within and without and more multivalent than before. The fear from Hemkant, the deeper fear at sin and the fear of social censure in the form of growing threat from the local community are portrayed in the play Hemkant's return from exile after his father's death had brought to Lalita, his sister, a feeling of freedom. The existentialist elements depicted in the play are of loneliness, alienation, rootlessness, despair and existentialist dilemma of how to live and how not to live.

Reflection

*Reflection* is a clinically accurate study of schizophrenia and the split personality of the unnamed protagonist. The play *Reflection* presents an image of man’s loneliness and inability to make contact. Reflection is surreal in the space that is deliberately creates between the palpable and the impalpable. The protagonist of reflection has to lose his reflection in the mirror. He then recognize for the first time in his life what it means to have a reflection, the capacity to look at one and to be noticed by others. The horror of all this drives him to suicide rather than adjustment. Elkunchwar describes reflection “as a ‘tragic farce’ and adds, the protagonist of
reflection may not be as big a name as Koestler or Zwing or Plath. he may not be able to translate his spiritual agony as effectively as any of them, but that does not make him a lesser human being than Kafka or any of them, or his tragedy any less than theirs.”

In Reflection, Elkunchwar presents the protagonist’s loss of reflection of his mirror image. This bursts on the mundane routine of his daily life which defines his existence as a paying guest in a one room apartment. He underlines protagonist’s disorientation and its impact on his life. The discovery of the loss of his reflection, a shock to the protagonist, appears merely ‘funny’ to the landlady who would like to put it into the papers and turn her lodger into a celebrity. She cannot understand why he should resist the idea. In her ceaseless chatter, she builds up an elaborate logic to rationalize the extraordinary phenomenon. The protagonist of the play Reflection is a victim hero; he thinks that there is something in that death. Rootlessness, inability to communicate, loss of identity and alienation are the existentialist elements displayed in this play by Mahesh Elkumchwar.

Flower of Blood

Flower of Blood is an artistic search of the two tender flowers i.e. of mother and daughter. The biological changes do make great impact on the mindset of the women. The dramatist comments on the psychological impact of these changes in this play. The two major characters Padma and Leelu are the victims of typical menopausal worry. In this play the relationship of Padma and Raju is mysterious and complex. Padma and Leelu suffer from the psychic problems like neurosis, advanced age, self-preservation, frigidity, metal-dissociation, introversion, inferiority complex, undischarged libido and others. This is the tragedy of depressed individuals. Flower of Blood is a family drama based on the tender relations of Bhau, Padma, Leelu and Raja. Shashi is absent but his impression is all pervasive. He is persona – non – gratis in the play. The family members love each other but it is hidden in the garb of love – hate sentiments. The tension arises out of misunderstanding. The two women live in claustrophobia, stifled with sex repression. In this play there is slight reference to father – fixation. Leelu’s affinity towards father and neglect of mother is because of her natural sensibility. Instinctive emotional stress is the basic cause of tension between mother and daughter. The inevitable and indispensable blood relation is
focused in this play. There is no alternative for blood relation. The inconsistency in human relations is focused in this play. The complexity of human relationships, destruction of social and cultural institutions, loss of selfhood and neurotic complexes are the existentialist elements dramatized in this play *Flower of Blood* by Mahesh Elkunchwar.

**Autobiography**

*Autobiography* is a family play. At the same time it is about writing, about creativity, the relationship between the artist and his art, the reality and the art, between experiences taken at the imaginative level. It is a met fiction – play on creative art. As a direct experience and as narrated to reader, *Autobiography* is about relationship among three individuals. Mystery which hangs over the human relationships of these the three is focus of the centre of the play. Elkunchwar comments, “A skeptical view of the claims of authenticity that writers too often protest too much, *Autobiography* brings all such pretensions to doubt.” Rajadhyaksha, Pradnya, Uttara and Vasanti the four are major characters in the play. An autobiography of an artist is subject (crux) of the play. It is a struggle of well known artists Rajadhyaksha, his inner and outer struggle as an artist and as an individual. In search of truth, Rajadhyaksha realizes that truth becomes Myth. This makes him restless. Rajadhyaksha glorifying truth glorifies the fiction. Pradnya, a research scholar is a meditative. This modern individual, young girl deliberately provokes Rajadhaksha for self-exploration. She reveals and discusses the things about his life and works. She leads Rajadhyaksha to reven truth, but she herself lives in hypocrisy and takes support of false things. She is engaged with Pramod but is fascinated towards Rajadhyaksha. The theme of Father – fixation is underlined in her relationship with Rajadhyaksha. There is no sexuality as such in this relationship but there is great attraction about his fame and honour.

**Party**

The drama of personal failures is one that surfaces around the triangle of Mohini – Barve – Damayanti. The play in its original Marathi version was first performed by Aniket on August 26, 1976, at the Chhabildas Hall, Mumbai. *Party* was made into a film in Hindi in 1984 by Govind Nihlani, for which the playwright himself contributed the screenplay and fresh dialogue.
Elkunchwar's Party is in fact a metaphor to fill up an intellectual and ideological void in urban India. Critics projected Party as an exposure / indictment of Bombay's creative community.

In Party, he shows the hollowness of middle-class lives. His plays constantly explore what lies below the facades of characters and families put up to fool the world. It reveals the essential loneliness of people. He presents the vulnerability of characters, the emotional price they pay in their quest for successful appearance, in their need to belong. His characters are displaced, disenchanted. They are dangerously normal, average people who are in search of happiness and fulfillment. They need love and affection. They also need sexual fulfillment. Many of its characters are thinly disguised caricatures of Bombay's high-falutin theatre-and -arts-circuit people.

Elkunchwar’s critique of this ‘set’ revolves in a Chekovian space around it. He shows them up in their pettiness and pretensions. Doctor is a ringside spectator watching the glittering world of these pseudo -moralists, having no concern with society and reality. Doctor is an outsider, but is still one of them.

"In Party I intended to project the vicious life of fourteen characters, who are away from each other and devoid of social belongingness and responsibility". (Elkunchwar in interview, p.162) An important factor in the play is the presence of Amrit, who does not appear at the party, but he is there throughout as the most important person in the setting. Never seen on the stage, he has the power to affect the lives of almost all the others, their very existence. He is as important as Godot in Waiting for Godot. In that play there is no drama without Godot, and no character is complete without him. The character of Amrit is more or less like that of Godot. He remains unseen till the end though he is more real and overpowering than all the characters on the stage.

Amrit, Doctor are the representatives of reason and commonsense. Amrit is a symbol and integral part of the play. His example is a unique adventure in The contemporary Marathi Theatre. Party present the of compulsion on the individuals to run away from their own selves. It is a way of disguise their hypocrisies. All the characters are rooted in the whole history of secret frustrations; it can lead them only to offensive violence. The sense of failure is dominant among all the major characters. Damayanti, Barve and Agashe live in fear because of their guilty
conscience. Feigned/pseudo-humanity is projected by Damayanti Barve. The cultural ‘set’ tends to reduce life to art at every point. “We are people who are always running far away from life”. It is this whole game of writers and intellectuals taking up populist pretensions and sneaking their way up to official favours and all the comforts and advantages. They imply that the subterranean area of dispute explodes into skirmishes throughout the Party.

Elkunchwar comments that Party is a slice of the process of creativity and failure in creativity. Damayanti and Barve are obsessed with utter sense of failure. Elkunchwar admits, “What I wanted to show ultimately was that when it came to taking a moral stand now, even the greatest artists and intellectuals turned out to be cowards running away from the confrontation”. Through this play Elkunchwar has explored the inner conscience, cowardice of elite class artists and masque accepted by them to hide their real self.

The characters in the Party are fractured individuals. They have not got any lineage or history so they have to adjust themselves with the atmosphere (situation) where they are placed. They are devoid of any culture. They are the people having personal life without history, lonely, alienated, fractured personalities. Their struggle is limited to themselves.

Party revolves around the mother-daughter relationship. Daughter comments on the hypocrisy of the mother, who is living in her own world of illusion and glamour. “You’re a parasite, you feed on other people’s glamour and you think it’s yours”, is an accusation which Sona throws at her mother Damayanti. All characters are obsessed with ‘Being and Nothingness’. Elkunchwar projects the death of ‘real’ values. Self-obsessed characters live in their own world of illusion. For this elitist group masturbation is a whole world. All the characters except Jogdand live in pettiness and pretensions.

He used Sigmund Freud’s Theory to search the self of the characters on these levels conscious, unconscious and sub-conscious sense of failure looms large in the play. The characters sense of failure and its agony, self- withdrawal amounting to self-destruction. Barve comments, “I have been in this business all these days, covering up lies with beautiful words”. Party is necessary to forget the self, to run
away from reality and escape from life. The characters are away from any integrity.
The truth (integrity) lies in the way artists face the Party.

In *Party*, he shows us the hollowness of middle-class lives. His plays explore what lies below the facades characters and families here put up to fool the world. It clearly reveals the essential loneliness of people. He presents the vulnerability of characters, the emotional price they pay in their quest for successful appearance, in their need to belong. Nothingness, rootlessness and selflessness, hopelessness and loss of self hood and identity are the existentialist elements of the play-*Party*

**Summing Up**

Mahesh Elkunchwar exploits the medium of drama to show the absurdity of all its elemental passions, conflicts and man’s struggle for self-exploration. The attainment of perfection is the fundamental trait of his creative works of art. All his protagonists face the conflict within, instead without, and finally retreat in frustrations.