Chapter - II

Mohan Rakesh
The central aesthetic problem of the modern writer is the problem of rendering “complete human personality ... in an age of lost values, lost men, and lost gods.”¹ The twentieth century has been rightly called “the Age of Alienation.”² The modern man is doomed to suffer the corrosive impact of alienation, which manifests itself variously in the form of generation gap, the credibility loss, the com-partmentalization of life, the stunting of personal development and the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life. As Edmund Fuller suggests, in our age “man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problems ... a conviction of isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness in his way of existence.” The malaise of the contemporary man has been considerably aggravated by what Spengler calls “the crisis of the present.” The present century has seen the dissolution of old certainties and, as Paul Brunton points out, “never before have many people plunged in so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and unsettlement.”³

Modern literature is derived from a shared sense of cultural crisis, the collapse of all systematic explanations of the world and the consequent questioning of all the established ways of forming experience. These artists admit the chaotic nature of the universe and at the same time they affirm the power of art not to make order, but to discover it.

In this process, the artist has a special function. He is expected not to evade darkness, but to search for light that emerges through darkness. “If the world were clear,” says Camus, “art would not exist.” So a work of art attempts to clarify our universe, defining mystery where it can, and bringing that mystery into sharper focus where it cannot penetrate it altogether. To
enter such realms is necessarily to confront darkness and dilemma at every level, but the serious artist is willing to grapple with whatever drives him forward in his search for meaning, aids in his exploration of human problems. By shaping experience as only it can, a work of art itself becomes one of our essential experiences, because it provides die insight, intelligence and coherence which life alone never offers.

Mohan Rakesh’s *Halfway House* is one of the significant modern dramas that powerfully echoes this modem malady, transcends time and space and symbolizes eternal human predicament. The pervasive sense of alienation has corroded human life from various quarters. Modern man has shrunk in spirit languishing in confusion, frustration, disillusionment and alienation. His very notion of reality has profoundly changed on account of Bergson’s theory of *duree*, Freud’s postulates about the subconscious, Einstein’s concept of relativity and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. Consequently, he suffers from an acute sense of rootlessness, which manifests itself as “the alienation from oneself, from one’s fellow men and from nature, the awareness that life runs out of one’s hand like sand.”5 The hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the harsh reality of what he achieves, what he professes and what he practices, what he really is and what he would like to be taken for, has crumpled his life, leaving an insidious effect on his inner being. The injuries inflicted and the scars left on his psyche make him realize his helplessness. He finds life ‘infinitely vast’ without any proper ‘linkage’ to hold it together from falling apart.6 Painfully aware of his precarious position, man feels tragically self-alienated.

These men often suffer from a gnawing sense of disintegration within and disjunction from the world around. The man-woman relationship is used by Mohan Rakesh to bring out the essentially alienated condition of human beings. His protagonists are alienated from the world, from society, from
their families and even from themselves as in *Aashadh Ka Ek Din* and *Lehron Ke Rajhans*. The psychic breakdown is quickened by the marital discord as in *Halfway House*. Rakesh is quite aware, as seen by his dramatic experiments, that there is no easy or final solution to these problems. Still his characters go on living intensely and he goes on fathoming their minds deeply. It is a creative act of living with die tragic sense of life.

Mohan Rakesh was initially named as Madan Mohan Guglani; later he was called Madan Mohan and finally he came to be known as Mohan Rakesh. His father was a prominent and respected citizen of Amritsar as he was an active social worker who held offices in various literary and cultural organizations. He took a keen interest in his children’s upbringing and paid close attention to their academic activities. Mohan Rakesh inherited love for music and literature from his father. His father did not earn much from his legal practice and, therefore, the family was generally under debt. Rakesh recalls the names of the people whom his father owed money—Pundit Loknath and Nihal Singh (there were some other creditors, too)—and how once he was made to tell a lie that his father was not at home when Loknath called on them.

When his father died, he left heavy debts. Rakesh recalls the landlord’s son’s shouting for outstanding rent even as his father’s dead body lay waiting for cremation the next morning. His mother’s gold bangles had to be sold to pay the rent before the dead body could be removed from the house.

Rakesh, along with his elder sister, had to shoulder the burden of the family, when he was only sixteen years old. While his early schooling was done in Amritsar, he completed his M.A. in Sanskrit from Lahore. After the partition of India in 1947, he, together with his family, settled in Jallandhar where he continued his studies. He did his M.A. in Hindi and stood first in
the university. His father’s influence on him was great and perceptible, but he was also influenced by his grandmother, though in a negative manner. She was extremely superstitious, believer in die caste system besides being a disciplinarian. As a child Rakesh was forced to stay indoors in dark and damp rooms, because she restricted his movements. In fact, she made a fetish of discipline and order.

Rakesh remembers how he was not allowed to watch from the terrace of their house the dance of men and women, with baskets on their heads, in the courtyard of a house in the back-lane. His grandmother’s objection was that “They are Kanjars flow caste].” Rakesh could not understand what was wrong with being Kanjars because he enjoyed watching them dance and himself wanted to dance like them. He was also forbidden to play in the street. If he did, he would be contaminated by the magician Bhanshah and the leper Kuljug Prasad: “Even if we stay locked inside the house, their contamination takes hold by coming through the windows or skylight.” (Cappola, 4)

This naturally fostered a deep dislike for discipline in Rakesh, who developed a rebellious streak in his personality. When he was confined because of the grandmother’s commands, he relied on his imaginative resources and passed the time by creating imaginary worlds and moving in them.

The following lines draw a self-portrait of Rakesh which he wrote to project his mental state: “In the house, our energy is suppressed. When I am kept inside, I cry for a while and make myself sick. Besides, the world of the house and street, I have my own private world. Sometimes I travel with the rows of big black ants through holes in the dark. Sometimes I make tiny atoms fight with each other in the sun. I try to look for different faces from the broken plaster of the walls up to die running water of the tank. To change
the plaster faces, I adjust die corner of my eye, I change the faces of the water by moving my hand. If the flow disrupts, the faces which I have made, I give them new forms.” (Rakesh, 1974: 5) When as a child Rakesh had fe-
ver, he had to stay by himself but he had no problem spending time. He would contemplate the bars on the ceiling of the room, break and join them, “gather a whole world and build it in the courtyard, jump through die ventilator and walk all around the world, put together and destroy the history of the lines on every face, make up a story about everything you hear and then forget it.” (Rakesh, 1974: 10)

Rakesh was given to day-dreaming “at home, in school, any place, at any time.” While attending a class, he would begin to doodle on his slate. He would see the person in front as two individuals and would cease to listen to external voices. Even as the teacher lectured, he slipped into a trance. After completing his M.A. in Hindi, he got a job in Elphinstone College, Bombay, where he worked from 1947 to 1949. After losing this job, he remained unemployed for sometime and then got a teaching assign-
ment for a short while in Jallandhar. He lost this job also because of his outspoken views on political issues and because of his mixing teaching with politics. For a brief period, he also taught in a Delhi college. For two years he worked as a teacher in a school in Shimla, but resigned on his own. After that he got back to Jallandhar and started teaching again and from 1957 on-
wards, he pursued his writing. For a short period, he also edited the well-
known Hindi Journal Sarika (from 1962-63), but then quit the job, as he felt confined and hemmed in by the discipline of deadlines.

Rakesh was a versatile writer, who experimented with many genres, which included short stories, novels and plays. In addition to these, he also published collections of essays, biographies and travelogues. He breathed a new life in whatever he wrote, but it is as a dramatist that his work earned him accolades. In fact, his plays lent respectability to the Hindi theatre. His
first play *Aashadh Ka Ek Din* received the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* Award for the best play in 1958. *Lehron Ke Rajhans* and *Aadhe Adhure* were two other full-length plays which he wrote. In 1968, the Sangeet Natak Akademi again conferred an award on him for his eminence in the field of drama and his substantial and valuable contribution to its development. Together with Dharamvir Bharati’s *Andha Yug*, Rakesh’s plays bestowed a new dignity on the Hindi theatre. All of Rakesh’s plays have been performed repeatedly by several leading theatrical groups.

Apart from the accolades he received as a sensitive playwright, he was also considered as an outstanding short story writer, as his stories poignantly projected the anguish of the common man, struggling to survive. As recognition of his concern for the language of theatre, he received Nehru Fellowship to carry out research on ‘the dramatic word.’ He was keenly interested in the power of the word in creating and conveying meaning on stage.

His married life became a saga of disasters. He was a very poor reader of people and therefore, his choice of marital partner did not turn out to be right. Rakesh married thrice—the first two relationships ended in divorce; each time Rakesh took the initiative to separate from and convince his spouse to agree to the divorce. First time, it was an arranged marriage in 1950. He had met the girl briefly only a couple of times. There was hardly any compatibility between Rakesh and the girl who became his wife. She was egotistic, proud of the fact that she earned more than her husband did. It was not that Rakesh did not make efforts to adjust; he did admit that ‘marriage means adjustments and compromises but it has to be made by both.’ But if both the partners want to live life on their terms, the barriers become insurmountable and the problems irresolvable. The marriage lasted for a couple of years. Rakesh succeeded in convincing his wife for a divorce which eventually took place in 1957. His quest for marital happiness
continued and he married a second time in 1960. This time, he got married to the sister of a friend. This girl also he had met only for a short while, after which he took the decision to marry her. This alliance also proved to be a disaster and lasted for a much shorter time than the first one. The second wife proved to be totally unpredictable in her behavior and was a bit of a neurotic, reacting to situations too intensely. Rakesh got fed up of his home and went to live at the office of Sarika, but had to abandon it because his wife reached there and created an ugly scene.

This marriage, therefore, too ended in divorce. Rakesh earned the label of home-breaker among those known to him. Some of his friends, with a bourgeois mindset, looked at his failed marriages in an uncharitable light. He was in the process of losing faith in the institution of marriage, when he found a true companion, Anita. She fortunately shared his convictions and lived with him till his death in 1972, displaying devotion and commitment. She did not get upset, even when Rakesh once told her that “you have the third place in my life; in the first place are my writings and in the second place are my friends.” However, in spite of this stroke of good luck in Anita, Rakesh went on sliding downhill because of his excessive drinking, which perhaps was because of the several disillusionments and hurts he suffered in his dealings with the world and because of his authentic but extremely intense reactions to the inequities which are a part of reality, perhaps more so in the case of the Indian reality. He was strongly individualistic, extremely sensitive, suffering acutely at failed relationships, He did not like the mechanized urban existence which he thought caught people in Sisyphus-like hopeless situations.

He wondered why people did not throw away the superficial layers covering them while talking and why they shied away from self-knowledge and understanding; what force in circumstances compelled them to tell lies, show off, and hide the truth. He believed: “they should be themselves and
live with confidence. What do they have to lose by living as they really are? Do they never realize, even for a moment, the extent of their hypocrisy? They do not suffer their own pangs of conscience?” (Cappola, 11) Rakesh was a genuine and intense individual. He felt that something was constantly burning inside him and he felt the veins in his head would burst any time. He felt disturbed to find many things clashing: “Yesterday’s impressions with today’s experiences, adolescent dreams with surrounding reality.” (Cappola, 12) He was a restless soul, thinking deeply and intensely on sensual subjects. Sometimes while attending classes, his mind would go blank and die professor diought Rakesh was sick. One of Rakesh’s aristocratic friends commented on his personality: “The trouble with you [is] . . . you can’t create a balance among the impressions that you have. Your mind sways like a pendulum between this and that so that you can’t ever relax and you are always tense.” (Cappola, 12)

The research project on the dramatic word’ for which he had received the Nehru fellowship remained incomplete, and Rakesh died, rather untimely, at the age of forty-seven, due to pernicious side-effects of excessive liquor intake, and his intense, extremist temperament.

Rakesh’s friends included such well-known people as Kam-leshwar, Rajendra Gupta, Rajinder Paul and Om Shivpuri and they felt his loss keenly. These friends vividly remember die emotional warmth which Rakesh brought to bear on his relationships. He enjoyed his friends’ successes. When anyone of them went abroad, Rakesh enthusiastically accompanied him to the airport to give him a warm send off.

A mystique surrounds the personality of Mohan Rakesh who has been difficult to understand. Consequently, he has been dubbed simultaneously a messiah and a self-destructive individual. An evocative image used to describe Rakesh was that he was like ‘a drop of mercury on die floor’,
trembling and disintegrating into pieces in an attempt to attain stability. He was known to his friends as a person of restless temperament and immense impatience. In his own words, “This anxiety, this instability becomes a habit. A moment doesn’t last in its desire to become the next one. Wherever you are, you get up and go somewhere else. Leave whatever you are doing and start something else. If you are sitting and reading, turn the page every two minutes to see where your chapter ends.” (Cappola, 9)

It was this restlessness, perhaps, which made him hop from job to job; in fact he scoffed at people who stuck to one job for the sole reason of financial security. His credo was: “You need five hundred to live? Then borrow three thousand on interest and work for six months and earn six thousand.” It was only after he resigned from several jobs, and remained unemployed for some periods which created for him acute financial crisis, that he took to full-time writing.

He was an intensely emotional person, with very strong likes and dislikes. He raged at phoniness, sham and hypocrisy. One recalls post-Second World War American novelist J.D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield in his classic *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden castigated phoniness of all types and condemned hypocrisy so intensely that he became a symbol of authenticity of self in the Sixties in America.

Rakesh gave way to angry outbursts during arguments (reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence, who shouted, trembled and blew his top off in an effort to convince his interlocutor about the Tightness of the point he was making.) A large-hearted person, though never flush with money, Rakesh enjoyed spending money on his friends, with whom he spent time in coffee houses and restaurants in Connaught Place. Given to eccentric and obsessive behavior, he was once looking for a suitable toy for his son in Karol Bagh and when he finally did find it, he went on a toys-buying spree, till he
exhausted all the money in his purse. But the same Rakesh haggled furiously with his publishers who he thought were paying him less for creative work than it deserved. He was no exception to the general belief that the publishers were a niggardly lot who thrived and enjoyed luxuries at the expense of the poor writer who sloggled but got a measly sum for his labours. However, unlike many other writers, he fought hard for his rights. Being a stubborn individualist, acutely concerned about the authenticity of his self, completely conforming to the Sartrean model of an authentic being, Rakesh was dead against practicing 'bad faith' which he thought was a sign of a weak personality and hypocrisy. He was shocked to observe how people wore layers of artificiality on their faces and every now and then he found the layer on someone's face broken away and the person revealed. Beneath the layers of love, sympathy, courage and enthusiasm, the real face would be very helpless, timid and unenthusiastic. (Cappola, 11) He regarded it his duty to wage a war against the publishers. His attitude was unprecedented in the Hindi publishing world. He was a sentimental person, always ready to help his friends, and an idealistic individual, who thought that the tribe of creative writers, of all people in the society, needed to cherish and practice certain values for creating a better society.

Unpredictable as he was, at times, he would suddenly runaway to isolated places like Dalhousic or Srinagar and live in Dak Bungalows in remote, isolated areas. This invited the charge of irresponsibility and indiscipline from his friends and detractors who could not understand his need for isolation for doing his creative work. He believed that he could come out with his creative best only in such peaceful, undisturbed and isolated places and, therefore, it was imperative for him to get away from the bustling life of the metropolis of Delhi. Kamleshwar, one of his close friends and admirers, agreed that Rakesh did lead a disorganized life, but
clarified that deep down, he observed a fantastic discipline, the discipline of the mind and the creative spirit.

His disorderly living notwithstanding, the process of his writing was always well organized and ordered. Behind the chain-smoking, at times even shabbily dressed, Bohemian, there was a Rakesh who had an enviable clarity of artistic purpose.

His artistic creed consisted in commitment not to any particular philosophy or ideology, but to his self and his times. It was his firm belief that if the artist is truly committed to the authenticity of his self then like a blind man groping alone in the dark with a stick, he could hit out at the powers of terror and darkness with his entire self. The line of the famous song of Rabindranath Tagore: “Jodi tor daak shune keu naa ashke, Tobe ekla chol re,” (If no one responds to your call, then walk on your chosen path alone), could be aptly applied to Rakesh. He did not mind treading alone the path of creative integrity, even though it created problems for him at times.

Rakesh began by writing short stories, and went onto write novels and plays, “From 1948 he had also been keeping a diary intermittently, and portions of this diary, written between 1948 and 1968 were published under the title Mohan Rakesh ki Diary in 1985.” (Agrawal: 1999: 93) Rakesh was an important part of the new writing that emerged after Independence and which was mainly the work of the city-based, city-oriented, middle-class writers. These writings mainly focused on the problems which were the creation of the urban life and which concerned the middle-class. During the 35-40 years after Independence, the writers of the “new writing” diverted their attention from the larger social or cosmic problems to the middle-class individual and his struggle to find happiness. Their concern has been the “personal happiness and sorrow, the forging of one’s identity as well as personality, the establishment of new values, the new parameters of the
man-woman relationship, the desire for personal freedom which, when too powerful, takes the shape of licence, the apprehension of loneliness." (Agrawal, 93) Prem Chand's era which was marked for social awareness and projection of social problems was succeeded by an age in which the individual became central. Not much was written about education, unemployment, the generation gap, the fast changing social scene and the go-by given to values in the mad race of competitiveness, and the younger generation going astray in the absence of concrete moral values. The period from 1950 to 1972, on the contrary, explored the psychic complications of the modern middle-class man, caused by his angst and frustration from breaking human relationships. Rakesh was an active part of this creative milieu and his writings constitute an in-depth study into the psyche of the city-bred, city-harassed, middle-class man.

As mentioned earlier, Rakesh started his creative career as a writer of short stories. Between 1944 and 1972 he wrote a total of 66 stories of which 12 were published during his lifetime. The form of the story (Nai Kahani—New Story), created by Rakesh and his contemporaries like Rajendra Yadav and Kamleshwar was different from that of the stories that had been written earlier. Stylistically, these stories used a language which was natural and simple. In fact, the language of everyday use was adopted as the vehicle of creative expression. Thematically, a large body of writing took up man-woman relationship (Rakesh dealt predominantly with this theme), in addition to personal failures, frustrations, despair and collapse of traditional values, leading to extreme individualism. There was a certain amount of openness in the portrayal of sexual relations which was in sharp contrast to the earlier writings. In die case of Rakesh, his stories were mostly extensively based on die experiences and impressions he had noted in his diary. Talking of his stories, Rakesh said:
Most of my stories are about people living through the torture of relationships in their loneliness, where I have tried to depict through the individual, his environment. This loneliness is not the loneliness of the socially isolated individual but the loneliness that conies from living within society and it leads not to any kind of cynicism but to the need to live through it. The attempt is not to see the individual and society as mutually opposed and mutually exclusive, distinct from and separated from each other but rather to see them as related in such a fashion that the individual reflects the dilemmas of society and society reflects the torture of the individual (From the flap of Sampoorna Kahaniyan).

One reason why most of Rakesh’s stories took up the subject of man-woman relationship was the changing identity of woman during the Sixties and the Seventies. The women got a measure of economic independence by entering the job market. Because of their increased level of education, women acquired a greater self-awareness and by virtue of their jobs got greater opportunities to inter-act with men outside home. This necessitated a crucial change in the mindset of men and required a different equation between husbands and wives. In fact, the institution of marriage itself came to be interrogated and the traditional idea that marriage had to be rescued at any cost was not found sacrosanct. In Mohan Rakesh’s stories, novels and plays, one rarely finds man-woman relationships leading to love, happiness, wholeness and surrender; on the contrary these relationships, whether in or outside marriage, are fraught with tension, dislike, suffocation and alienation, in spite of his protagonists’ desire and attempts to find happiness and joy. The very titles of some of his short stories are suggestive of diis mental condition. “Doraha,” “Dhundhlaa Deep,” “Aparichit,” “Aadami aur Deever,” “Marus-thal,” “Lakshyaheen,” “Insaan ke Khandahar.” These
stories and novels are largely based on his personal experiences and for that reason they contain an intensity of emotion which is difficult to match but, because of this factor, at times they seem to lack the breadth of canvas that comes from creating diverse characters, circumstances and emotions. Nonetheless, their artistic merit remains undisputed.

Mohan Rakesh wrote three novels (again the titles of the novels are noteworthy for their sadness and despair) *Andhere Band Kamre* (1961), *Na Aanewala Kal* (1968) and *Antaraal* (1972).

While in the field of short story, there were three prominent writers at that time viz., Rajendra Yadav, Kamleshwar, and Mohan Rakesh, there was none who could match the competence of Rakesh in the genre of drama. Rakesh wrote three full-length plays: *Aashadh Ka Ek Din* (1958), *Lehro Ke Rajhans* (1963) and *Aadhe Adhure* (1969). Rakesh virtually dominated the field of drama. With his very first play, he established himself as an unrivalled dramatist.

In 1959, he was awarded the first prize by the Sangeet Natak Akademi for his first play. He also penned some one-act plays, *Dhwaninatya* (audio plays), *Beejnalaya* (seed plays and radio plays) which were published under the title *Ande Ke Chhilke, Anya Ekanki Tatha Beej Natak* and *Raat Beetne Tak Tatha Anya Dhwani Natak*. He left one play, *Pair Tale Ki Zameen* unfinished, which Kamleshwar, his close friend, completed later, on the basis of die notings left by Rakesh.

*Aashadh Ka Ek Din* (1958), like his other plays, takes up the man-woman relationship, but in addition to that it also reflects Rakesh’s concern for the issue of royal patronage and creativity. There is a conflict between die two—it was his belief that die creative powers of an artist get atrophied, if he kowtows to the powers mat be. This is what happens to the protagonist of *Aashadh Ka Ek Din*. Rakesh noted, to his chagrin, how some of the
creative writers, to garner small and big gains, indulged in sycophancy and in this play, he highlights the dangers of sycophancy. Act II of the play explores the psychology of the royal officials who have arrived from the capital of Rangini-Sangini and draws a parallel with the modern officials and students of art who tend to get involved in futile discussions and arguments, getting lost in issues of secondary importance and at times indulging in arrogant behaviour. Act III also underscores the conflicts between creativity and the reality of life which often entangles a writer in the struggle for survival. Even though the play is located in the past, the issues it raises and the concerns it depicts are undoubtedly modern and relevant even today.

Lehron Ke Rajhans (1963) focuses on man-woman relationship in a more intense manner. The vitiating factors are identified as clash of egos, split personalities, and breakdown of communication. Why does breakdown in communication occur? Graham Greene provides an answer in his novel The Quiet American: “Wouldn’t we all do better not trying to understand, accepting the fact that no human being will ever understand another, not a wife a husband, a lover a mistress, nor a parent a child.” (60) This breakdown of communication inevitably leads to sadness, loneliness and the anguish of not being able to communicate. This play is unambiguously modern in its concerns, since despair, loneliness, and the sense of futility are modern phenomena. Halfway House published in 1969 also takes up the clash of egos of man and woman, and depicts the disintegration of not only the individuals but the institution of family, and a complete breakdown of communication among the family members.

As noted earlier, Aashadh Ka Ek Din deals with man-woman relationship, and dramatizes the separation of Kalidas from Mallika whom he loves deeply. Mallika also emotionally responds to his love and talks about “choosing feeling with feeling.” She sends him to the capital, because
she wants him to gain recognition and fame and is ready to embrace him when he gets back—it is another matter that his return is not shown. Kalidas does leave, but feels pained at doing so. For him going away from Mallika is wrenching away an important part of his own self. In Lehron Ke Rajhans, the man-woman relationship unlike Aashadh Ka Ek Din, is not tender and loving; on the contrary it is soured by the self-centeredness and ego of Nand and Sundari, who progressively become lonely because of their bickering, and their inability to mould themselves according to the desire of each other. They are aware of each other’s shortcomings, but still they refuse to or are unable to understand each other sympathetically. Constant tension and bitterness between them turns them into islands unto themselves. The relationship becomes full of hostility towards each other. Act III shows their perverse delight in hurling accusations at each other. Nand finds it difficult to stay with Sundari; and she in turn cannot stop him from leaving. Like the earlier play, there is a parting in this one also, but this parting is marked by hard feelings, dissatisfaction and defeat. They seem to have been cursed never to achieve happiness and contentment through each other. Halfway House is the culmination of the theme of disintegration of man-woman relationship. In this play, the man and the woman are not only married, they also have a family, consisting of two daughters and a son. This family seems to be a gas-chamber in which the members are getting choked; they are unable to breathe normally, as it were, and feel suffocated because of the oppressive, rancorous atmosphere that lies like a pall on the family. Each one of them seems doomed to suffer, whether it is the head of the family, Mahendranath, or his wife, Savitri (the only earning member who is supporting the family) or the boy Ashok or the youngest adolescent, Kinni. One difference between Aashadh Ka Ek Din and Lehron Ke Rajhans on the one hand and Halfway House on the other is that while one does not know whether Kalidas and Nand ever returned to Mallika and Sundari, but
Mahendranath does return every time he threateningly leaves home, as if he were tied to the stake from which he cannot get away. But then others also are unable to escape the hell that they are in—Ashok has no job and, therefore, has no alternative, Binni, though married, keeps returning to her parental home (she is there for the most part of the action in the play), Kini is of course too small. Savitri, who keenly longs to get away from the place she has come to abhor, makes a desperate attempt to go away, but has to come back, as if fated to live with the family and suffer. She is in an extremely tricky situation (perhaps each one of them is): cannot live there, but cannot escape either.

In all the three plays, the women play a crucial role. Their thinking, their attitudes and their decisions become catalysts in giving direction to the events in the plays. That they act, and then suffer for their actions is another matter. However, they are fully conscious women, who are aware of the complexity of their circumstances, and respond sensitively to the varying crises they are placed in. While Kalidas (*Aashadh Ka Ek Din*), Nand (*Lehron Ke Rajhans*) and Mahendranath (*Halfway House*) are weak, divided and insecure personalities, Mallika (*Aashadh Ka Ek Din*), Sundari (*Lehron Ke Rajhans*) and Savitri are stronger and decisive in their thinking. All these women are emblematic of different emotional states; the three plays can be truly categorized as woman-centered.

Even though Rakesh declares in the beginning of the play: “if the woman of the family were replaced by another, she would put up with me in a different way ... or she would assume my role and I assuming hers, would have to put up with her,” the focus is undeniably on the woman, and it is clear that the woman is more important in the scheme of the play.

Rakesh was fully conscious of the demands of the theatre and, therefore, kept the unities of time and place in mind while composing the
plays. *Aashadh Ka Ek Din* spans a long period of time, no doubt, but *Lehron Ke Rajhans*, and *Halfway House* encompass the action in not more than thirty hours. One could of course, point out one or two instances which are not in keeping with the stageability of the plays: for example showing a fawn on the stage creates problems and generates some bit of confusion; similarly the presence of the monk Anand in the bedchamber of Sundari appears unrealistic. However, *Halfway House* does not suffer from any such incongruities.

As far as the language of the plays is concerned, one finds similarities in terms of the sharpness and pointedness of dialogues. The language is polished and chiselled, primarily because, as mentioned earlier, Rakesh had a special fascination for the "word." In order to suit the historical background of *Aashadh Ka Ek Din* and *Lehron Ke Rajhans*, the language used is Sanskritized which succeeded in creating the appropriate atmosphere, but the language is not obscurantist and inaccessible to the audience/reader. Even the few difficult words can be understood with the help of the context. The use of words is not excessive, just the required number of words to explain the situation or express an emotion. Economy and appropriateness are the hallmarks of the language and it is difficult to find a single superfluous word which can be done away with. Consequently, there is a tautness in the plays, which contributes to the effective expression of stressful situations. It is difficult to find such judicious, restrained, and discreet use of the language in any other play of his contemporaries.

All the three plays generally end with long dialogues, at times monologues, which tend to slow down the pace. Mallika’s long monologue in *Aashadh Ka Ek Din* and Nand’s long monologue in *Lehron Ke Rajhans* impressively articulate the problems that are exercising their minds. In *Aashadh Ka Ek Din* even though Kalidas’s dialogues, before Vyom arrives on the scene, are in the form of an exchange, actually they could be consid-
ered monologues, because while talking to Mallika he seems completely lost within himself. However, in *Halfway House* the long speeches of Juneja and Savitri are not strictly monologues, because Juneja and Savitri are not reflecting or exploring diem-selves (a characteristic of a monologue); rather these speeches refer to others, and are made with the purpose of communicating with others. For this reason, we find that the pace of the play does not slow down, unlike the earlier two plays.

Even though *The Man in the Black Suit*, who could be taken as the Chorus of the play, tells us that “this play is as undefined as I am,” the play does have a recognizable plot. One has to remember that the plot of *Halfway House* is not of the traditional type, which contains statement, complication and resolution. It does not conform to the Aristotlean norms of beginning, middle and ending. The only sense in which the play remains undefined perhaps is that it is, as the Chorus says, difficult to pinpoint the determining agency. Is it the Chorus (or any of the men, who are the same as the Chorus) or the woman, or the circumstances, or the questions that are the result of the inter-relations of the characters? In this sense, the plot is difficult to define. But, just because the play has a different type of plot does not make the play plotless.

The plot encompasses the life, experiences, frustrations, bitterness and despair of the members of a family who seem to be caught in a desperate situation. The plot conveys a higher level of meaning about human existence, but of that later. For the time being, it is important to remember that Mahendranath (husband), Savitri (wife), Ashok (son), Binni (the elder daughter married to Manoj) and Kinni (the younger school-going daughter) are members of a doomed family whom nobody can help. Not that there are people eager to help: Singhania, the stupid and lecherous boss of Savitri, is interested only in showing off his power and status, vis-à-vis the family, and a hint is made in the play about his sexual attraction for Savitri, Manoj, once
Savitri’s lover, has married Binni and remains off-stage, but complicates Binni’s and her parents’ lives by continuously taunting her about the ‘infection’ she has brought from her parents’ family, which does not let them live in peace, Jagmohan, whom Savitri wants to use as a support to get out of her marriage and family, confines his interest to having an affair with her, and that too, on his own terms, not the least concerned about what plagues her family. We have one person, Juneja, Mahendranath’s friend, who is sincerely anxious to solve the tangle that has knotted the lives of the members of this family, but he ends up a failure in his efforts. But why does Juneja fail in spite of his sincerity? Who is responsible for the impasse that has been created in the family out of which there does not seem to be a way out for anyone? These questions I would address in due course, but for now, as part of the plot, we find Savitri is frustrated, angry and upset at her having to sustain the family, because Mahendranath has turned into an idler, lacking in self-confidence and the desire to engage himself productively, though he does not desist from passing snide remarks at Savitri for her extra-marital relationships. This further exacerbates matters. Savitri becomes bitter at her lot in having once loved and married a nincompoop, like Mahendranath, an utter failure in life not only economically, but also as a husband and as a father, not giving support to his wife, and neglecting the children all of whom seem to have gone astray.

In spite of her frustrations, Savitri is keen to bring order into the household, and feels responsible for the children. In the very first scene, she is shown picking up Mahendranath’s pyjamas lying on the back of a chair and folding them to keep them in place. She also picks up the tray lying in the room: “Everything is left for me to do.” (7) Her concern for Binni’s unhappy marriage gets revealed in her attempts to find out what is wrong with Binni’s marriage. It is noteworthy that when Binni tells her mother that Manoj is neither unfaithful nor ill-tempered, nor unwell, Mahendranath does
not hesitate to make a satirical comment: “No, no problem at all.” It is Savitri again who questions Kinni as to where she had gone, when she returns in after her long absence from home. The older girl (Binni) is right when she says, “You’re the only one who feels responsible here. If you too ...” Savitri had got Ashok a job with Air Freeze, which he left. He also quits college without completing his studies. Savitri fails in her efforts to get Ashok a job through Singhania. The reasons remain unclear—these could be Singhania’s shrewdness under his stupid exterior (he cannot be stupid, after all he has a job worth Rs. 5000 per month) or Ashok’s indifferent and even mischievous response to Singhania. But Savitri’s failure further adds to her frustration and she begins to find her stay in the family increasingly difficult.

What gives fillip to her ambitions is the return of Jagmohan to the city. He is an old flame, but things could not work out with him earlier. She is keen to pick up the thread and revive her relationship with him, with the hope that he would provide her with an escape route from the hell-hole which her home has turned into. In the meantime, Mahendranath has left home and has begun to stay with Juneja.

In Act two a suggestion is made through the stage direction that Savitri, too, had decided to clear out. When she gets back home, unlike earlier times, she “glances at the disorderly room but doesn’t try to tidy it.” Binni is informed by her that Jagmohan is coming to pick her up and she decisively announces to Binni: “When you come next time I may not be here”—she is so sure of Jagmohan’s love for her. Of course, she is mistaken, and is in for a rude shock. An indication of how Jagmohan is going to treat her is again provided in a stage direction. She puts her hand on his but he “takes her hand away.” The play operates in a subtle way through innuendoes and suggestions. Savitri is keen to get away from home, but despite everything, there is something which binds her to the place: while
leaving with Jagmohan, she asks him as to when he thinks she will be back because “I ought to leave a message,” Why leave a message, if everything is over between her and the family? Why worry about saving her family the anxiety? There is that connection, that bond which makes the desire complex. Wanting to escape and yet not wanting to.

However, the acrimony that characterizes Savitri’s and Mahendranath’s present relationship is reason enough for the two to divorce and get away from each other. The intensity of the hostility between the two is described by the Older Girl (Binni) to Juneja who has come to have a talk with Savitri for a possible reconciliation. “When I lived here it was like being . . . you can’t even imagine what it was like. . . . Daddy’s rages when he tore Mama’s clothes to shreds . . . when he gagged her and beat her up behind closed doors . . . dragging her by the hair to the WC . . . (shudders) I can’t even recount the fearful scenes I’ve witnessed in this house.” If any outsider had seen all this, he would have wondered why they hadn’t.” (63-64) The irony of the situation is that even Juneja, in spite of his desire to sort things out between Savitri and Mahendranath despairs of the situation ever improving. “You really think that nothing can be done?” asks Binni sadly and his reply is “Perhaps something can be done for a day. Or even for a week. But forever? Nothing!” The obvious choice then for the two of them is to go in for a divorce and that is what Binni has on mind. But it is not an easy proposition. Savitri, after having been rejected by Jagmohan, has nowhere to go. And Mahendranath, in spite of Savitri’s numerous affairs with other men, still loves her and cannot live without her. And, therefore, a marriage of 22 years standing, with three children, one of them married, is in a piquant situation; it cannot break, and it does not work.

Mohan Rakesh’s *Halfway House* has evoked a strikingly diverse range of critical opinions, from highly laudatory to severely hostile. “Within the tradition of Hindi drama, this play has enjoyed a canonical status,” says
Sanjay Kumar. 7 Recipient of a number of awards, the play is regarded as the best work of Rakesh, the most complete drama in Hindi and an important landmark in Indian theatre. (98) Some critics have compared it with the plays of Brecht, Ibsen, Strindberg, O 'Neill and Arthur Miller. On the other hand, others denounce the play as being sentimental and commercial, superficial and hollow. (106)

Most of the critics regard the play as a scathing critique of the tragic disintegration of the decadent modern middle-class family. The situation of each of the characters points to the bitter fact of contemporary life. This specially lifts the play high above oilier Hindi dramas. From a director's point of view, it is die first Hindi drama, says Om Shivpuri, that truly represents die contemporary life.9 According to Ramesh Kumar Jadhav, this social drama truly represents modern middle-class head and heart with all the implicit contradictions.10 To delineate contemporary man's misery, Rakesh took help of historical figures in Aashadh Ka Ek Din and Lehron Ke Rajhans, but all the characters in Halfway House live in the present. His Halfway House expresses modern man's miserable lot and the crisis of his existence. Though most of the critics regard Halfway House as a truthful reflection of contemporary life, Sunderalal Kathuria disagrees with this claim. He feels that Rakesh as usual deals with some specific references, exceptional situations and not with the general scene.

Critics also differ widely regarding the vision of life presented by the play. To R.L. Nigam, "Aadhe Adhure is a highly significant play sociologically.” (83) Dilip Kumar Basu thinks that the play "hesitates structurally between the naturalistic and the absurdist.” (126) He argues that the four variations of 'Man' presented in the play do not combine to give a powerful impression of 'Everyman' systematically revealed, though the Prologue together with the naming of the characters as The First Man, The Second Man etc., all to be played by the same actor, do encourage such a
search. The 'Everyman factor' (128) is distributed in different locations in such an arrangement that the well-known absurdist methods of presenting the essential predicament of man by locating them either in one solitary character or in paired couples is not observed here. The contradictions arising out of these two pulls—naturalist and absurdist—make its meaning ambiguous. In spite of its leaning towards the Absurdist tradition, it is devoid of die Absurdist theatrical images. Devaluation of language, a marked characteristic of the Theatre of Absurd is also absent here. The play also does not take "the ultimate absurdist position of dismissing historical time as a dimension of Reality." (131) Sanjay Kumar, too, feels,

*Halfway House* shows the obvious influence of modem western theatrical and philosophical traditions. The strongest influence is of the Theatre of the Absurd (discernible in the debt both to Camus-like notions of the Absurd and to the theatrical ideas of dramatists like Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter). The influence of the Theatre of Ideas, particularly works of Sartre and Shaw, is also strongly there (obvious in die too long discursive section at the end). The themes and tropes of the play place it in the universalistic idiom. (133-34)

These diverse claims at lineage do not point to any inherent confusion, but to the multiplicity of meaning implicit in a great work of art. A successful work of art is a complex whole woven out of diverse elements. If we want to understand its true nature and meaning, we have to examine it from many angles. A new possibility of interpretation always remains open. Ernest Hemingway, in an interview, talking about his Nobel Prize winning novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, remarked: "I tried to make a real man, a real fish, and a real shark. But if I made them good and true enough, they would mean many things."
In spite of the diversity of interpretations, critics agree that the essence of *Halfway House* is constituted in the alienated individuals groping in the pervasive meaninglessness. Each of the characters experiences a sense of isolation, loneliness, alienation, absence of communication, loss of identity and the loss of values. They are frustrated, dissatisfied, skeptical and vexed at their familial relationships. They feel trapped in the contemporary social pattern. The sense of incompleteness also serves as a trap for them.

Man always runs after a mirage. He does not value what he has but tries to run after the unattainable. He is quite aware of his mortality, and still, perhaps because of it only, pines for immortality. Man has envisaged the ideal state of completeness in the Godhead. Being a man, it is not possible for him to attain it in this life. This is his human limitation. Still he pines for completeness. This search for the unattainable continues throughout his life. The nature and form of the search taken differs from person to person depending upon his innate character.

In his epoch-making drama *Halfway House*, Mohan Rakesh deals with this problem of incompleteness through the discord in the man-woman relationship. Mahendranath and Savitri are happily married, but the colour of marital concord soon fades away. Ironically each becomes intensely aware and intolerant of other’s incompleteness, forgetting his/her own. They never realize the possibility of being each other’s complement. Though this pining for completeness is present in every individual, this search becomes much more intense in Savitri.

With the rise of the curtain, Savitri is seen constantly nagging, insulting, denouncing Mahendranath, and deliberately making him feel small. Mahendranath feels that he is slighted by all:
What is my status in this house? Silent acceptance, perpetual snubs, constant insults, is that all I deserve after so many years? (26)

He feels that they use him only as a convenient stamp of respectability. Savitri puts him down with a satirical question, “Aren’t you exaggerating your importance, slightly?” and snubs him with a direct blow: “When has he ever been any use? On what grounds does he say.” (26) She tries to justify her behaviour as a natural response to the present oppressive burden of her family she alone has to bear:

(sits down on cane pouf, removes tablecloth from her face, tearfully) I can’t manage any longer, Binni. I just can’t. (23)

Savitri is not ready to accept Mahendranath as he is. She fails to understand the meaning of conjugal life and love. One who only talks and walks like a man is not a man. “To be a man involves something more. . . . Personality. . . . Strength of character.” (68) To her, Mahendranath is not even half a man. Her pining for perfection makes her so bold as to openly say, “I want a man, not just a miserable . . . hanger on!” (71) Even twenty-two years back, when they were newly married, Savitri felt the same way about him. “That day too you pulled Mahendra to bits. . . . You said he was a wimp, had no backbone,” (72) says Juneja. It was obvious even then that Savitri did not consider Mahendranath to be the man with whom she could spend her life.

Juneja unveils the reality by discovering the root of all die trouble in Savitri’s concept of life. He agrees that today Mahendranath, at times, becomes bad-tempered, but there was a time when he was happy by nature—he laughed from within. It is Savitri who always makes him feel low. Juneja feels that she has trapped Mahendra, to use him as a ‘wretched
pawn’ (77) at the moment of crisis. He claims that it is her attitude that is responsible for this state of affairs.

Savitri aspires for a life, which Mahendranath cannot give her, which no man can possibly give her. These twenty-two years have not been spent in “any interpersonal adjustments as she would have us believe, but in search of escape routes and a sanctuary.” (88) Juneja’s words are relevant: “The point is that if any of these men had been a part of your life instead of Mahendra, you would still have felt that you had married the wrong man. You would still have encountered a Mahendra, a Juneja, a Shivjeet, or a Jagmohan and thought and reacted in the same way. Because the meaning of life to you is how many different things you can have and enjoy at the same time. One man alone could never have given them to you, so no matter whom you married, you would always have felt as empty and as restless as you do today.” (74)

Savitri’s search for completeness ends disastrously. Even as she is trying to attract Manoj, he takes away her elder daughter, Binni. In a desperate frenzy, she makes hysterical attempts to find a way out. Just then she hears that Jagmohan is back. Seeing all doors closed before her, she tries “to step into die past.” (75) When she goes out with Jagmohan the whole new life is before her, but Jagmohan does not fulfill her heart’s desire. Choking with frustration, she has to come back to the clammy’ halfway house. Savitri feels disillusioned and frustrated that all men are alike, no one is able to help her:

All of you . . . every one of you ... all alike! Exactly the same. Different masks, but the face? . . . The same wretched faces . . . every single one of you!

(76)

Juneja emphasizes the futility of all her attempts with a sardonic question:
And yet you felt you had a choice? . . . was there really any choice? Tell me, was there? (76)

This is the inevitable end of Savitri’s mad search for completeness. Though Girish Rastogi feels, “The contradiction and struggle between incompleteness and search for wholeness could not be elevated for viewing at a very high creative plane,” (112) die play goes much beyond Savitri, the individual—’ambitious’ or psychic’ (14) She blames all die men as being alike, but fails to apprehend the truth—all human beings are alike in being incomplete. A sense of wholeness can be experienced only when two complementary fragments are put together. Being complementary to each other may perhaps be the answer to the problem of incompleteness. The moment of awareness slips from her hands. In her futile efforts to achieve more, Savitri loses whatever she has. She is the real loser.

Mahendranath’s return at the end serves as a foil to that of Savitri. Surely, both of them are destined to come back, but in a different sense. Mahendranath also wants to get away from the hell. He wonders why he continues to stay there. He, too, feels desperate and declares that he won’t come back to eat up die foundations of die house: “But I’m no longer hungry. I’ll never be hungry again! “(27) In spite of himself, because of his love for Savitri, he comes back at the end in a miserable condition. This is the human predicament. There is no total meaningless-ness, no unmitigated gloom, but no grand tragedy either in Halfway House. Rakesh is quite conscious of the futility of any positive solution. The moment of fruition is never realized in this incomplete world, but the possibility always remains halfway open because there is no total loss of positive values in the world of Halfway House. Everything in this world is incomplete—halfway, since man himself is incomplete.

No wonder that Rakesh does not take the extreme Absurdist position. This is a bleak picture of a disintegrated family, but no total breakdown is
intended. They cannot live together happily, but cannot leave each other either. This is not Rakesh’s failure in characterization, as some critics feel, but a mature understanding of the nature of human existence. This is no ‘rationalization,’ as Meena Pimpalapure claims, but an intuitive apprehension. Rakesh is not trying to solve the riddle of human existence. No wonder, the question remains unanswered. There is no action, the play goes nowhere. This is not Rakesh’s failure. This is the implicit meaning of that experience.

This incompleteness is not a curse. It is a condition of existence. It is but natural that the drama Halfway House cannot be pigeonholed in any one slot—the Absurdist/ Naturalist/ Universalistic. Rakesh’s vision of life transcends all the established categories. It is not the story but the vision that forms the crux of the play. So it does not matter whether the original story be of Rakesh or be based on Anita Aulak’s short story ‘Din se Din.’ The essence of a Shakespearean play lies not in the common well-known story, but in Shakespeare’s vision of life. This is the difference between Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy and William Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Mohan Rakesh’s Halfway House symbolizes not only a halfway modern house, but stands for the whole human world, which is incomplete.
References:


9. Ibid., p. 85.


13. Ernest Hemingway, quoted by U.S. Mathur, Ernest Hemingway: The Old Man and the Sea, p. 188.
