

Critical Analysis of The Theme of Family in Elkunchwar's As One Discardeth Old Clothes

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Born to a Telugu Brahmin feudal family in Parwa village in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, Mahesh Elkunchwar was educated in Nagpur University. He taught English literature at Dharampeth Arts, Commerce College, Nagpur and M.P. Deo Memorial Science College, Nagpur. He writes plays in Marathi language which have been translated into multiple Indian and Western languages including English, French and German. Elkunchwar's first play was Rudraravsha (The Savage Year) that came in the year 1956. He has been honoured in India with Homi Bhabha Fellowship (1976-78), The Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards for Yuganta, National Academy of the Performing Arts 1989, Nandika 1989, Maharashtra Gaurav (1990), The Maharashtra Foundation Award (1997), The Sahitya Academy Award (2002), The Saraswati Samman, one of India's highest literary awards in 2003. Internationally, too, he has been bestowed by The Brittingham Fellowship in 2005. The prestigious Janasthan Puraskar was pronounced on him for his service to the theatre.

As One Discardeth Old Clothes . . .

Mahesh Elkunchwar, the great Marathi playwright, uses contemporary situations and social problems to project the life-in-death attitude of modern life. The central theme of this play is a sense of utter meaninglessness in our existence, which leads to a state of metaphysical anguish. Mahesh Elkunchwar presents the total absence of communication between one man and another in contemporary life. With Elkunchwar's *As One Discardeth Old Clothes* drama takes a

departure from pseudo modernism and traditional symbolism to the drama of ‘non-communication’ modern man’s failure to understand each other which is real tragedy of human life. In the play, too, there are many instances where the dramatist presents a complete breakdown of communication at various stages between husband and wife, children and parents. When in the play Mukund asks Aai: “*Did he read to you too?*”

AAI: Me? If he spoke to me even once in a day, I felt like offering pedhas to the deity. (Pause) and what did I know about poetry? (Pause) while reciting poetry his eyes would shine, as if anticipating someone.

This throws light on the Indian model of husband-wife’s relation in the post-modern world, where they did not have anything in common and by the end of the play this “golden appearance” of their relation lies naked and bare when Aai in her revelatory speech states that she was wedded to a ‘blind wall’.

The play *As One Discardeth Old Clothes* also focuses on a dead marriage and moral values prevalent in Indian society. The play exposes the fact that the institute of marriage today has lost its sanctity and its nothing but a compromise to promote personal needs. This is evident when we look at all the marriages in the play whether it is Baba and Aai, Bal and Rekha or the couple with “love marriage” Sanjeevani and her husband.

There are incidents where Baba had been suspecting Aai, his own wife of infidelity where on the other side he pined for Kaku, the widow, whom he himself had brought to his place after her husband Madhu’s death. Not only this, he secretly confesses before dying, his yearning for Kaku in the following lines:

“Why did I meet her so late, Raghu?” . . . and goes on further to say, “Who knows what’s in her mind. But I always pined for her. . . Saw her at Madhu’s wedding. When the partition was removed ‘n I saw her face, it was like an axe blow to my heart. Raghu. I had made up my mind to have her by any means. (Pause) After Madhu had died on the second day of his marriage . . .

shall I reveal the truth? I was happy. (Pause) it's true I bought her here then, but always kept her at a distance. . . I'll confess now. Apart from you, I never thought of anyone."

There are even instances when his son Bal following his father's footsteps is suspecting Rekha, his own wife on the same charges on which Baba suspected Aai. While talking to his father Bal breaks down and states "Why can't I and Rekha get along, like you two did? (Pause). I suspect her". There is a further breakdown in marriage and communication when in further revelation he states that he cannot make love to a wooden doll and questions why does she always stay at her parents' place citing her research. There is lack of understanding which reminds one of the "angry young men" who are dissatisfied, frustrated with their living conditions. Another example of discontent in marriage is when Sanjeevani wants to return to her husband's house citing her daughter Medha as the prime reason the society's hypocritical stance comes out in the conversation that follows:

Mukund: Medha's crying is but an excuse. If you didn't go home he'd come here and create a ruckus. (Sanju weeps)

Aai: What's the use of weeping now?

Bal: Face the music. Love marriage indeed!

Sanjeevani: Your's isn't, okay? Why do you keep your wife at her mother's?

Aai : Enough.

Sanjeevani: Now you say 'enough'! Once I saw Rekha Vahini weeping at the well. When I kept nagging, she said, 'Your husband may hit you, At least he comes near you'.

The play offers a contemporary situation where people are more concerned with themselves than the outside world. In the play both the children Mukund and Sanjeevani are bothered about their own worlds rather than the one who has made their worlds, their dying father. This is shown in the beginning of the play when Mukund states: ". . . I'll be back in a minute. . ."

Bal: Why are you always fooling outside?

Sanjeevani: Really! No sense of the occasion . . .

Mukund: How would my staying here help? Be back in five minutes.

Taking the conversation further Mukund goes on to say:

I'll go and come back in five minutes. Or else Vinya will turn up in a huff.

Sanjeevani: Your friends are no different from you.

Bal: Mukund, do you have any sense? Any moment now. . .

Mukund: He's been this way for the past one month.

Bal: Fed up already?

Sanjeevani: What are sons for?

Mukund: Oh! Hell!

Bal: He seems to be in a great hurry!

Sanjeevani: You are the stuff of his life, Mukund. Infact you should not leave his side even for a moment. If he should call for you. . .

Mukund: He has lost his speech three weeks ago. I have some important work with Vinu. I must squeeze my money out of him.

Sanjeevani whom the father has given the maximum attention and support throughout life even goes on to accuse her father. Sanjeevani, too, goes to the extent of accusing her father who did not oppose her love marriage and went all the way to get her married.

Sanjeevani: What kind of father was he?

Aai: Don't you dare accuse him. I won't stand it.

Sanjeevani: Had he been even a little assertive, I could have been saved from this hell.

Aai: How ungrateful can you be, girl?

Baba: Raghu, watch this. The most that I ever gave was to her. And she now says it was my fault. Is she right, Raghu?

Sanjeevani: My eyes were misted over back then. But wasn't Baba aware of my husband's reputation in the village? I was deceived by his good looks. Was blind to all else at the time. But how could Baba accept a worthless, illiterate scooter mechanic as his son-in-law?

Aai: You forced him to. You brought things to such a pass . . . (Pause) You've made me speak out before the children.

Sanjeevani: There was a way to get out of that. So many girls do it.

Aai: Thank Lord he is not able to hear all this.

Sanjeevani: You only had eyes for your sons.

Aai: Didn't he give that mechanic of yours all the money he had received from his Insurance Policy so that he could start a workshop? What more could a man have done?

In an Indian society it is hard that a middle class father agrees for a love marriage at a time when the whole family is against it. Baba did help her and went upto the extent of getting her married with the groom of her choice but is still in the bad picture because she herself regrets having married her own choice now.

When Mukund is told to go upstairs and take care of his father:

(Mukund makes a face, goes near the bed, and stands like a pole.)

Baba: Raghu's here.

Mukund (mutters): What are you muttering about? Let go now.

Baba: I shall. Soon as Raghu comes.

Mukund: Let go and let us go as well.

Baba: As soon as he comes.

Mukund: it's over a month now. One can't bloody well go anywhere. On top of it that Vinya's breathing down my neck. To hell with anything!

Baba: Boy, I'm in a greater hurry than you. What can I do? See how he's kept me pining. He has always been like this. Or else would I have-

Mukund: . . . Though you stayed amidst us you were never ours. Just gave us what we needed. Petted us, fondled us absent-mindedly. That's all.

Baba: Stay here with pleasure. This domesticity, the money matters, the tangle of relationships. Enjoy it all. I have only one relation now.

Thus, Baba in the above lines talks about his relation with the eternal Self, the oneness of God, so the waiting of Raghu can be treated as the wait to death and Raghu can be treated as God.

Not only Mukund, Sanjeevani is also detached with his ailing, bed-ridden, sick father and Baba too, is disturbed by her "sugar bags" attitude.

Baba to Sanjeevani: You are my own flesh and blood. And you always behaved like this. Brusque, callous.

Sanjeevani says . . . *“The things we have to say to placate the dying.”* Baba goes on to remember her childhood. *“How did you change like this? Your mother is so virtuous. You aren’t like her. Positively not like me. You failed in your Higher Secondary Exams twice, little Sanju. Dropped from college halfway through. And what did you do? Cut your hair short, and kept roaming through the village streets displaying your bare arms! Sanju, Sanju, and that marriage-Sanju!*

Sanjeevani goes on to say, *“Why are you calling me on and on? Don’t get so involved with anyone. Even I did whatever I could for you. But I too have my life, my home. . . this man is past hearing now. (Pause) I should have told him right in the beginning that my husband has pawned the workshop. What good will it do now? Had I told him then he might have tried to do something. It’s too late now. Who knows for whom he has left the house? I’ve got to have a share. And even I haven’t, I am going to fight for it and get it. He said the law has changed now. Now even daughters have the same share as sons.”* The father is on his death-bed and she is thinking about property rather fight for the property. She has no regard or respect for the dying father and in the course of the play we come to know that Sanjeevani who has got the maximum love from Baba is actually not his own blood.

Yet another striking feature of the play is its comparisons with Samuel Becket’s play *Waiting for Godot*. In the play *As One Discardeth Old Clothes* . . . Baba bed ridden, on his deathbed is waiting for Raghu to come and take him. Raghu, in the context of the play can be treated as “Death”, or in Indian Context as “God” who will come and take Baba’s life away from the materialistic world. There are instances in the play when Baba throughout the play keeps on inquiring about Raghu. “Did you see Raghunath? Has he come? Seen him?” He goes on to say:

“Your children were never yours. I never was yours. I was always only my Raghu’s. Nobody else’s. Do come Raghu. Come now, friend. See how my eyes start streaming the moment I call your name”.

There are other instances why one can relate Raghu to God: *“This is ever since I was born. Once while playing in the mango grove I fell from a tree. Then I saw him for a moment. Raghu. Searched the entire grove. He had disappeared ... then again, once while swimming in the Morna, my feet suddenly cramped up and I was drowning. He was watching unblinkingly from the shore. Somebody rescued me. After that I had sought him so often, foiling on the riverbank. He was not to be found.”* These lines show how Baba had escaped narrow death twice and thought as any human would think ‘I am gone, my life is gone’ or further still ‘God has given me another birth.’

As a playwright his main concern was to portray the crisis of contemporary man caught in the web of uncongenial surroundings and the persistent threat to human relationship.

Bal: Tell me. Why did you never give me anything? Your intelligence, your good looks. Why am I so mediocre? In brains, in appearance. Is that why you never liked me? Then why did you allow me to be born? Aai never felt like my mother. Nor you my father.

Baba: Should I tell you?

Bal: Always kept me at a distance. Never picked me up on your own. I would insist on coming close and sticking to you, and only then would you lift me onto your lap. But even then I could sense that your touch was cold.

Baba: Tell you?

Bal: Speak just once, baba.

Baba: Can you bear it?

Bal: Please tell me

Baba: LISTEN THEN.

Bal: Did I ever ask for anything? This would be the first and the last. (Pause)

Baba: I had a suspicion then. I still do. (Pause) that your are mine.

Bal: Am I nothing to you?

Baba: It's true that your mother never strayed. But once the doubt entered my heart, it never quite left me.

Bal: How close you and aai were. Did that exclude even your own children?

Baba: Son! Son!

Bal: Why has everything with me gone wrong? Why can't I and Rekha get along, like you two did? "(Pause) I suspect her.

Baba: Don't son. Its suspicion that has shattered my heart.

Bal: Rekha is fine otherwise. But she hates coming close to me. I can't make love to a wooden doll. (Pause) why does she always stay at her parents' citing her research? Who has she tucked away there?

Baba: Remove I, remove that doubt from your heart. (Pause) whenever doubts raise their hands in my mind, I would grow jet black with shame. Felt, whosoever you might be, what was your fault? Therefore I would read you the 'Gitanjali'. Teach you shlokas, walk in the moonlight singing songs to you, holding you in my arms. All this was not for you. I used to be so ashamed of myself that I would try to make up for it.

Bal: You never even beat me possessively.

Baba: I did. Only once. Smouldering from doubts, regrets. Then I lost all peace of mind. Thought you are somebody else's child, what right did I have to punish you? I hugged you close and kept weeping all night. (Pause) once while out for swimming, you did not return in time. For a moment I felt, it's all for the better. Then, terrified of myself, I just collapsed..

This long piece of conversation shows a mere breakdown of relations of husband-wife and the suffering child and his feelings. How modern man's surroundings and environment have been a constant threat on the human relationship.

The play also throws light on the condition of women as the role of wives. The psychological status of Sanjeevani, Rekha, and Aai is exposed throughout in the play. Sanjeevani discloses, *"Look at us on the other hand! If I come this way even for a brief while, promptly comes a message from the in-laws. Come home immediately and dip your hands into the kitchen-sink again."*

The play, also, highlights the typical Indian women/wife thinking. Behind every word of Aai lies the female sensibility of an Indian woman.

Aai... Somebody has to go first, others later. Yet I only wish I'd been the one to go first . . . (Pause) together for forty years. The things we have seen together, gone through together. . .

Aai who had suspected Kaku and her husband, goes on to say Kaku the following lines:

"Don't say such things. Debts are mutual. And we are happy you are here. (Pause) Had he not been with me then could I have managed this on my own? (Pause) He never said no to anything. The entire household worked on my wish, my dictates. I just had to say something and he would oblige. He would have gladly walked across the desert for my sake. What do these kids know!"

When Bal asks Aai *"Never saw Baba speaking to you. Somebody who spoke eight or ten languages."* Aai replies to it by saying, *"We did not need language to have a dialogue. For forty years our home remained lit steadily like a lamp in a shrine. Was that without understanding each other? (Pause) You keep your wife at your parents' year after year. You won't understand this."*

Even though there are incidences where one comes across that the two-Baba and Aai- are not on talking terms with each other. There has been throughout the course of the play instances which clearly show that there was a communication gap between the two.

Aai in her revelation states that *“Only she (Kaku) understood what your spirit was like! (Pause) When did even you understand me? Did you ever try? Was I ever even worth it? (Pause) I wasn’t even close enough to raise my eyes and ask you this. My life was spent in yearning for you. My ears kept thirsting for just one call from you. But no. Even at the most intimate moments my name never emerged from your lips. And now? My ears hurt with your constant ‘Manu, Manu’. No way. Nothing moves me anymore. It is too late. You never let me know your mind. I was wedded to a blind wall. (Pause). It’s true. My home had a golden appearance. You never let any shortcomings show. Everything happened according to my wishes, my desire. All true. Whatever I wanted, happened, whatever I asked for, I had. (Pause). Was that all? You never asked for anything rightfully or demanded anything. Why didn’t you ever show some possessiveness? Why did you never quarrel with me? Why was this cold distance permanently between us? This abyss? Tell me. Speak at least now. Don’t just keep hollering. Or is there somebody else in mind? How did I know if you are calling me? Initially there was physical gratification. I agree. But my mind was never satiated. It always remained empty, starving. Neither my mind nor my body came to be fulfilled. Everything was mechanical, cold. Our children were born without love. When once I angrily asked you to stop all this, you stopped forever without any fuss. Didn’t you really want to ever reach my mind? Whom did you have in mind? Gave me a standing in the community. Gave me respect. Gave me credit for everything. It was you who gave Bai shelter. But I took the credit even for that and you allowed me to. Gave me all. . . I always kept my eyes vigilantly open. But in your behavior I never saw even a shadow of it. Neither in yours nor in hers. Forget about false notes in speech or behavior, you never even lifted your eyelids to look at her. Which is why the doubts multiply. What was this profound feeling in your heart that forced you to maintain such a grim distance? Looks wise I’m fairer, where qualities are concerned I may not be fairer, but at least am an equal? Arre, only keeps shouting you son of a . . . See, a cussword came to my lips. I have never even uttered the mildest one in my whole life. And now ... Do I even have the right to cuss? You can’t get it by asking for it. I know. You have to deserve it.*

If you have luck enough, you get it. I didn't. Once I did try to seek my happiness elsewhere. Are you listening? You are listening, aren't you? I can't bear this on my life anymore. Listen carefully. Sanju isn't yours. I sought your mind. When I couldn't find it, I sought solace elsewhere. Just once. Found nothing there either. My spirit was scorched. And when I returned to you with blisters on my soul, Sanju was in my womb."

Aai pours her heart out in the last words of her. It is not her but the frustration of a dead, lifeless, failed marriage speaking through her, voicing the anger. Earlier in the play, when the children ask Aai about her relationship with Baba she very confidently states that they did not need a language to share and communicate. But in her revelatory speech the whole truth stands exposed. She had suspected her husband. Kaku, whom the couple had given shelter, when praises Baba, Aai articulates her insecurity by saying that it was only Kaku who understood him and how his spirit was like and Aai herself could never understand her own husband. Aai goes on to complain that it was Baba who never understood her nor ever tried to. She goes on further to say that her complete life was spent craving for him. The frustration is taking the shape of words. She moves on to say that she was for all this time wedded to a 'blind wall'. Though, she is satisfied that Baba gave her everything, respect, a house with a golden appearance, but she still starved. She confesses that Sanju is not his blood but a child brought from outside the marriage. These dialogues, in the end, throw light on how "successful" was their understanding and how well they "understood" each other. This piece of conversation is important because it shows a complete breakdown of modern man's relationship with each other in this case a relation so close and dearly kept, that of, a husband and wife, considered to be the most sacred of all.

The Title:

As One Discardeth Old Clothes . . . is metaphoric to the old patriarch. He is discarded; his own children don't want to attend to him at the crucial time. His son, Mukund, wants to go out of the house as he has other works to attend to and his daughter, Sanjeevani, is too busy to think of property and her in-laws. It is a burden on her to stay back and take care of her father in the final moments of his life. Instead, the whole family does the talking with the physical body and father

can listen to all the vows and complains of family members. In the play the family members criticize their father taking turns unmindful that his spirit can listen to it, though he cannot react to it. This throws light on the human predicament that once we consider someone dead, passive, weak, lifeless, feeble, powerless, ineffectual we go on to reprimand the other person and do not hesitate to talk ill of him. Just as one buys new clothes and forgets the old ones not necessarily because they have been torn but only because they have become out of shape or out of fashion. Similar is Baba's condition, he spent the whole of his life fulfilling his children's demands and someone whom he gave the maximum attention and love in the end discard him like unwanted, old clothes.

The title has a spiritual meaning also:

*vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya
navani grhnati nara 'parani
tatha sarirani vihaya jirnany
anyani samyati navani dehi*

The original title of this Marathi play refers to a quotation from *Srimad Bhagwad Gita*, Chapter II, which when translated into English bear the following meanings: *vasamsi*--garments; *jirnani*--old and worn out; *yatha*--as it is; *vihaya*--giving up; *navani*--new garments; *grhnati*--does accept; *narah*--a man; *aparani*--other; *tatha*--in the same way; *sarirani*--bodies; *vihaya*--giving up; *jirnani*--old and useless; *anyani*--different; *samyati*--verily accepts; *navani*--new sets; *dehi*--the embodied. The complete translation means:

As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, similarly, the soul accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.

Transference of the atomic individual soul to another body is made possible by the grace of the Super soul. The Super soul fulfills the desire of the atomic soul as one friend fulfills the desire of another. The *Vedas*, like the *Mundaka Upanisad*, as well as the *Svetasvatara Upanisad*, compare the soul and the Super soul to two friendly birds sitting on the same tree. One of the birds (the

individual atomic soul) is eating the fruit of the tree, and the other bird (Krishna) is simply watching His friend. Of these two birds--although they are the same in quality--one is captivated by the fruits of the material tree, while the other is simply witnessing the activities of His friend. Krsna is the witnessing bird, and Arjuna is the eating bird. Although they are friends, one is still the master and the other is the servant. Forgetfulness of this relationship by the atomic soul is the cause of one's changing his position from one tree to another or from one body to another. The *jiva* soul is struggling very hard on the tree of the material body, but as soon as he agrees to accept the other bird as the supreme spiritual master--as Arjuna agreed to do by voluntary surrender unto Krsna for instruction--the subordinate bird immediately becomes free from all lamentations. Both the *Katha Upanisad* and *Svetasvatara Upanisad* confirm this:

samane vrkse puruso nimagno
'nisaya socati muhyamanah
justam yada pasyaty anyam isam asya
mahimanam iti vita-sokah

"Although the two birds are in the same tree, the eating bird is fully engrossed with anxiety and moroseness as the enjoyer of the fruits of the tree. But if in some way or other he turns his face to his friend who is the Lord and knows His glories--at once the suffering bird becomes free from all anxieties." Arjuna has now turned his face towards his eternal friend, Krishna, and understands the *Bhagavad-Gita* from Him. And thus, hearing from Krishna, he can understand the supreme glories of the Lord and be free from lamentation.

Critical Analysis:

Waasaansi Jeernaani, published in 1996, first performed by Samanvay, Pune. A short drama, slightly over an hour, it features his strengths: feelings, sensitivity, domestic relationships, and mental topography. In distinct echoes of *Wada Chirebandi*, family members gather round their patriarch's deathbed. His spirit removes from his body and speaks, but they cannot hear him; instead they address the body with all their unresolved matters and unexpressed emotions. Tired

of waiting for 'Raghu', he finally leaves for the permanence of death. Elkunchwar's characteristically subtle use of dialogue makes this a very moving text.

Despite the vastly different nature of the six works contained in the collection, one common thread seems to bind all of them. In all the plays the characters represent not just their own reality but also hold a mirror to the class and community they belong to. This is Elkunchwar's greatest strength as a playwright. He seamlessly depicts the macro reality by engaging the audience in a story that has to do with a handful of characters. Another distinctive feature of his writing is his projection of the sexual politics between men and women. He can leave the audience reeling with the way his characters use their sexuality to communicate their rage as well as their helplessness.

Ultimately we realize that one strong cord unites all of Elkunchwar's drama: the individual's quest for fulfillment, or its social denial, with disillusionment waiting at every step of the way. The individual is physically never alone- Elkunchwar populates his stage world with family or society- but despite that company, he invariably feels lonely. Empathy from others hardly ever occurs. Often, we find several individuals exhibiting these traits in the same play, each like a planet in its own orbit, revolving in the others' presence, but remaining solitary and isolated. Elsewhere the same focus falls more narrowly on one or two central characters.

Elkunchwar has lived and worked in Nagpur, away from the centre of Marathi Theatre in Pune and Mumbai. Maybe it is this perspective of an "Outsider" that enables his plays to work not just as good theatre but powerful social commentary as well. Paradoxically Alekar achieves the same by being an "Insider." He has lived in Pune for most part of his life and often directs the plays he writes and also acts in them sometimes. Once again as a writer, his range is phenomenal and the myriad issues taken up by him are awe inspiring to say the least. It helps the cause that his writing is pungent with a wicked subversive brand of humour underlining it.

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