



**HALFWAY HOUSE:
A CRITIQUE ON LOVE, MARRIAGE, SEX, AND VIOLENCE**

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ABSTRACT

Rakesh's plays depict the real-life events and incidents of the contemporary Indian society. Most of the plays deal with the theme of love, sex and violence. It reveals anger and frustration of the post-1960 generation in the Indian context. The ideas implicit in the themes are revolutionary. They are opposed to the conventional norms and established values.

Rakesh explores human mind and its complexities in all depth and variety. He presents man-woman relationship in terms of sensuality and violence rather than love and affection. Regarding marriage, the play Half Way House projects two types of views through the character of Mahendranath and Savitri: traditional view of marriage expecting male-dominance and marriage as a companionship and as a means for self-fulfilment.

Introduction

Arundhati Banerjee in her Introduction to *Five Plays of Vijay Tendulkar* says: "In the 1960s four dramatists from different regions of India, writing in their own regional languages, were said to have ushered modernity into the sphere of Indian drama and theatre. They were Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Girish Karnad in Kannada."

Rakesh's plays depict the real-life events and incidents of the contemporary Indian society. Hence, there is verisimilitude in them. Most of the characters are life-like. They unveil such baser aspects of man's life as ugliness, crudity, vulgarity, corruption, etc., that are common to all ages and societies. However, the reality projected in the plays, which is difficult for the audience to accept, is not a populist stance; it throws light on the present situation and obliquely suggests the playwright's longing for new morality.

Most of the plays deal with the theme of love, sex and violence. It reveals anger and frustration of the post-1960 generation in the Indian context. The ideas implicit in the themes are revolutionary. They are opposed to the conventional norms and established values. The emphasis here is on human nature and its complexities. In projecting the revolt of the plays' protagonists against conventionality, Rakesh displays his love of humanity and his commitment to human values.

Rakesh explores human mind and its complexities in all depth and variety. He presents man-woman relationship in terms of sensuality and violence rather than love and affection. An anti-romantic playwright as Rakesh is, he projects not love but its perversion, not sex but its degradation.

Regarding marriage, the play *Half Way House* projects two types of views through the character of Mahendranath and Savitri: traditional view of marriage expecting male-dominance and marriage as a companionship and as a means for self-fulfilment.

Mahendranath is the upholder of patriarchal order where man is the head of the family and woman is subordinate to him; he is the "Absolute" "One"-- and she is the "Other".² Being the master of the family, he expects Savitri to take care of his whims and fancies. When the play opens, Savitri is seen as a very dominating lady. But the account of their past life, that is revealed through their conversation shows that in the earlier years of their marriage Savitri has been the victim and Mahendranath the victimizer. There has been nobody to play the role of a rescuer (Juneja may be seen so, but at the far end of the play). Binni's remarks throw light on the horrifying situation. During the time of quarrel, she tells Juneja:

It's not something you can easily rub out, uncle. When I was here, I sometimes thought that I was not in a home. Instead, I was caged up in a zoo where-you probably can't even imagine what has been happening here. Daddy would rip Mamma's clothes apart he would stop her mouth up with a bandage and beat her up in a locked room. He would then drag her to the bathroom and over the toilet-(trembling). I can't explain how many horrifying scenes I've witnessed in this house. (107)

Savitri's long speech towards the end of the play gives the fuller evidence of this violence in which Savitri explains to Juneja Mahendranath's expectations as husband:

"A woman should walk like this, talk like that and smile like this. Why do you always lower my prestige in front of other people?" The same Mahendra who smiles nervously like a coward with his friends comes home and acts like a lion. No one knows who he's going to attack, who he's going to rip apart, or when. Today, if he is excited, he'll set his shirt on fire. Tomorrow, he'll knock Savitri down, sit on her chest and start banging her head on the ground. He shouts, "Speak up, are you going to live your life the way I want? Won't you do what I say?..." (115)

Mahendranath's violence arises from his orthodox, traditional ideas of man-woman relationship. Considering himself the lord of the family, he seems to think:

**Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself
but as relative to him...she is the incidental, the inessential as
opposed to the essential. He is...the Absolute-she is the Other.** ³

Being the upholder of patriarchal order, he is of the view that the wife should try her best to fulfil the wishes of her husband. Therefore, he could resent any part of her conduct that went against what he considered proper in a wife. Whenever Savitri goes against his wish, he reacts violently. Physical torture becomes the part of their daily routine. Now and then he criticizes Savitri stating that he lost his capital in the business to fulfil her expectations. He is typical- a type of husband who is never pleased with his wife. He does not realise how to behave with his well educated wife. Wife for him is not a life-partner but just a slave, a puppet without any thoughts or feelings. Being the educated woman, he expects, quite ironically, that she should have a better understanding of how to behave. That is why he used to say: "How can you refuse to go there?...you say you're educated you don't even know how to act properly." (115). He always remains conscious of his position among his friends and not of his duties as a husband and as a parent. In his severe beating of Savitri, one can easily notice the savage beast hidden within his personality. That is why Binni, from her childhood experiences, calls her parental house "a zoo". (107)

Husband for Savitri should be a loving companion and marriage a means of filling the hollowness, an inner void in each other's lives. Every woman has the dream of home where all the members live happily, peacefully, sharing their pains and pleasures and fulfilling each others expectations. However, the harsh treatment and physical torture that she receives from her husband bring to her notice that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine." ⁴ In the company of Mahendranath, she also realizes: "Women have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received." ⁵

This victim victimizer relationship is noticed not only in husband-wife relationship but also in Savitri's relation with her friends and her son. Ashok always remains indifferent to her. Like his father, Ashok is opposed to Savitri's inviting the influential persons as guests to her house though the covert object behind the gesture is to secure a job for him. Similarly, his beating of his younger thirteen year old sister reveals his patriarchal tendency. Juneja accuses Savitri that her quest for a perfect mate "a complete man" is futile. Her disillusionment is the cause of her restlessness. So, no matter, whom she has married, she would have experienced the same frustration with any person other than Mahendranath sooner or later. For her so called friends, she appears to be use-and-throw object.

Throughout the play, there are repeated hints of Savitri's extra-marital relationship with various men. This may raise the question of morality. However, one cannot call her adulteress. There are two reasons: (i) she badly needs a job for her son so that he may financially support her by being engaged in a job somewhere, and (ii) she often dreams of an ideal life-partner. She is in the search of a man "who would be rich like Juneja, learned like Shivjeet, high positioned like Singhanian, sweet-tongued and tiptop like Jagmohan and handsome and liberal like Manoj." ⁶ She is not conscious of the fact that one person cannot alone possess all these qualities and there is nothing like a 'complete man' anywhere in the world.

The play depicts the effect of lovelessness. All the family members are alienated from each other and leading a solitary life under the same roof. Individualism makes people materialistic and therefore loveless, perhaps. So, material things become more valuable to them than human being. Everybody in the family needs and wants to have love but nobody is ready to offer it. T. S. Eliot depicts this spiritual sterility in his *The Waste Land*. In this, water symbolizes love and compassion:

**Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road. ⁷**

Throughout the play, it is not made clear that what exact kind of relationship Savitri has with her friends. The million dollar question left for the audience to ponder over is: Is that the sexual or asexual relationship? However, it is easily noticed that sexual morality is not the issue for Mohan Rakesh. Not a slight hint is given anywhere in the play that Savitri bears a loose character. Savitri's matrimonial fidelity is not in question. Nowhere does the playwright hint that the critical economic condition of the family forces Savitri to entertain her friends. The main reason seems to be her search for "complete man". The man-woman relationship, depicted in the play is essentially irrational, illogical, not in consonance with its surrounding. Naturally, the result is the chronic state of uncertainty, anguish and depression. The cause of the absurdity lies in the temperamental incompatibility reflected in their denial for mutual trust and sacrifice. There is chaos and confusion here that threaten not only the material life of Savitri and her husband but the very value system on which it is founded.

Chaudhari rightly points out, "With Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) Hindi drama makes a departure from pseudo-modernism and traditional symbolism to the drama of 'non-communication' – the modern man's failure to understand himself or to understand the other person and their mutual failure to understand each other, which is the real tragedy of modern life." ⁸



The names of the characters portray this absurdity vividly. Mahendranath is the king of gods and Mahendranath in the play is just the opposite, leading the life similar to that of a beggar. Basvaraj Naikar rightly points out, "One may easily notice the irony involved in his name. 'Mahendra' which means the Great Lord Indra, the mythical god known for wealth, luxury and glory provides a sharp contrast to Mahendra who is known for his utter poverty, humiliation, and helplessness."⁹ The Savitri in the mythological story rescues her husband Satyavan from Yama. She is the symbol of fidelity, devotion, sacrifice. The modern Savitri appears just the opposite. The contradictory roles, the characters are assigned to play, portray the absurdity of contemporary life vividly.

Since, woman is the chief source of income the power of the house is shifted from the father to the mother and she asserts herself in the routine matters of domestic life. Both of them are unwilling to perform the roles assigned to them by the circumstances. Manchi Sarat Babu rightly points out, "...contrary to the patriarchal cultural norms of sexist roles, Savitri has more powerful controlling faculty than her husband... Savitri feeds the family and Mahendranath idles away without helping her in the housework. This upsets the cultural norms of patriarchy. Mahendranath wants to be manly and refuses to take up housework. But he does not try honestly to find some employment or other. Savitri resents playing the masculine role of earning the bread for the family and the feminine role of keeping the house, without being appreciated for dual burden. She seems to enjoy more freedom than a traditional wife but she cannot break the patriarchal fetters completely to realize her dreams. Mahendranath can neither play his masculine role successfully nor can break himself free from it. Both of them lack the faculty of spontaneity to have other options to come out of impasse and live happily. The economic realities and patriarchal norms have come into a direct conflict here. This creates a crisis in their family."¹⁰ The family members can neither adjust themselves with the situation nor can change it. There lies the tragedy of the family in its disintegration, particularly at material and psychic levels.

The play is absurd in nature not in its theme but in its technique, in the manner of treatment. There is very little direct physical action in the play. References are given constantly to the past which is the cause of their present frustration. Past is conveyed not by action but by the reports through the conversation. The same technique is noticeable in the portrayal of the characters. Their nature is revealed not through the actions. Instead, they are interpreted by others through their dialogues. Everyone explains the other from his/her own point of view only. Naturally, they come out with half-truths that appear rather absurd, for their being at once meaningful and meaningless.

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