

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

UGC Approved- (Sr. No. 62952)

Culture Roots Vs. Modernity in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion*

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Abstract

This paper examines culture roots vs. modernity in Mahesh Elkunchwar's play *Old Stone Mansion* (Original *Wada Chirebandi* in Marathi). During the mid-twentieth century major socio-economic and political transformations took place. The responses of these transformations can be found through the transactions at socio-economic levels by the Deshpande family that is residing in a small village in Maharashtra. The solution to such transactions leads to question roots vs. modernity. Further, such questions highlight the clashes at the domestic level as well as the ideology of different generations. The paper tries to find Deshpande family that is either oscillating or in dilemma for culture roots vs. modernity.

Key Words- *Culture Roots, Modernity, Transformation, and Ideology.*

Old Stone Mansion is originally written in Marathi as *Wada Chirebandi*, 1985 by Mahesh Elkunchwar. The play deals with modernity under the context of rapid economic development and the effects of the development can be visible on social status of each class of society during the 1980s. The Deshpande family members of old stone mansion are not ready to accept socio-economic transformations as they have already imbibed with ages old

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Brahmin tradition. So there are questions on culture roots vs. modernity. To find solution, firstly we need to look at factors that lead to transformation.

Historical Context

The year 1947 is important in the history of India for two reasons: firstly, the partition of India and secondly, acquisition of political independence. But the effects of these events fall unevenly in different States of the nation. The effect of political independence can be observed but it is difficult to find largely the effect of partition in Maharashtra state. Therefore, we need to find different context which leads to bring socio-economic transformation in Maharashtra. G P Deshpande points out that;

The history of post-war Marathi writing begins with a water-shed in Maharashtrian cultural history. However, this watershed is neither the end of the second world war nor the advent of freedom in 1947; it is the period beginning with or a little before the anti-brahmin riots of 1948 following the assassination of M K Gandhi on January 30 of that year and ending with the Second Five-Year Plan, a high watermark of Nehruvian social-welfare-oriented capitalism.. (2885).

The effects of such events fall on socio-political and economic conditions of different classes of society. Therefore, under the context, *Old Stone Mansion* is "... a commentary on the changing social, cultural and political milieu of the post-independence India, shadows of feudal structures, the deep rooted sense of tradition and the disillusionment amongst its urban youth..." (Anon. n.d 1). Therefore, we need to look at the effects of development on middle class of society.

The effect of development can be seen in cities. But, Urbanization did not happen quickly and evenly. The Brahmin class in general had benefited from modern education over a century. With the decline of their traditional professions as well as property, they migrated to city in search of job. With such migrations, a lower to middle-middle class began

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formulating in cities. The city itself became the subject of literary activities (2885). So there was a considerable amount of changes in society. *Old Stone Mansion* explores these contexts.

Old Stone Mansion: Textual Analysis

The family in *Old Stone Mansion* (*OSM* henceforth) consists of nine members. Dadi (grandmother) represents the first generation, her son, Vayenkatesh, who has just died at the beginning of the play and his wife Aai (mother), a widow be a part of the second generation. Their four children Bhaskar, Sudhir, Chandu and Prabha form the third generation, and Bhaskar and his wife Vahini and Sudhir and his wife Anjali's children form the fourth generation. Vahini (sister-in-law) and Sudhir's wife Anjali are daughters-in-law of the Deshpande family.

In *OSM*, the Deshpande family is set in a small village called Dharangaon in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. The play refers to social and, economic condition of Maharashtra during the 1980s. For instance, Ranju is attracted to Filmfare magazine (Elkunchwar 134). Sudhir is fond of Sunil Gavaskar and Kapil Dev (174). Further, the play includes modern equipment and machineries such as tractor, bulldozer, saw mill, railway, taxi. These modern equipments will be utilised by the villagers. Moreover, the old stone mansion of Deshpande family will be razed to ground to facilitate the new construction - sawmill by Bansilal. Some older issues like the status and education of women, their share in property and traditional family values are also explored.

Here, the Deshpande family is at the edge of transition. Many instances lead to highlight such transitions as there is no servant class visible in *OSM* but, there is a reference to a cook who has now taken a job in city to get better financial opportunity (144). The absence of servants in *OSM* indicates at least two points. One that the economic condition of the family in *OSM* is not affluent. It is possible to think that even though the Deshpande family might have had many servants by 1960s, they have disappeared because this play shows a much later stage of social and economic changes. Secondly, the long period of colonization in which the changes in society happened in a different manner. For the upper

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caste families, the change was introduced through availability of modern education. For example, as in the case of Sudhir who has moved away to Mumbai for a job. On the other hand, his older brother Bhaskar continues in the traditional position. Similarly, the servant class also found new opportunities of employment in the new places. Thus, a place like restaurant becomes available for earning money for a cook in this family, even though it does not completely change his position.

Under the context of *OSM*, class also needs to be understood along with caste. Dharwadkar states, “Deshpande was a hereditary title in countryside given to a Brahmin who served as the *head* of a village or small rural region for revenue collection and administration” (297). Usually such a family would be awarded some land. Thus, they became land owners. This ownership and the position of the Brahmin as the upper class put them very high in the social order.

There is also reference of gold ornaments that have been legacy for the Deshpande family. The gold ornaments of at least five generations are with the family. Therefore, the gold ornaments closely connected with social and traditional fabric of culture. When Prabha asks for her share of gold ornaments:

AAI: ... How old those ornaments are! They belonged to great grandmother-in-law and grandmother-in-law. The Deshpandes sold their lands, but never touched the women’s gold... (Elkunchwar 184-185).

Here, culture roots in the form of gold ornaments are so strong that land seems less important. As they avoid ages old identity of land owner before the honour of Deshpande women. The family gives more importance to gold though it is unproductive. The tradition root seems cut down as there is no more status of the Deshpande’s as the head of the village. Therefore, young generation of the Deshpande family members become ready to shift to city for better economic opportunities by leaving old stone mansion which is a symbol of deep rooted culture. So there is choice between gold ornaments and land and both, represents culture roots. While moving to city, a transition in the form of development can be seen.

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Old Stone Mansion additionally shows the family's reaction to the gold they have inherited. The Deshpande family members have different dreams over the share of the gold ornaments. Vahini has a dream of adorning her daughter-in-law with traditional ornaments. Prabha wants to sell her share of the ornaments and wants to utilise that money for her studies. So, there are two distinct opinions. The former indicates the traditional view while the latter focuses on the modern vision. On the other hand, even the women in the family think of gold as something the family must guard and pass on to the next generation. Thus, when Prabha suggests that she can use her share of the ornaments to support herself in the city and carve a modern life for herself. As,

AAI: ... What will you do with all that gold? Sell it?

PRABHA: Yes.

AAI: I'm asking because I'm ignorant. Will you really sell it?

PRABHA: I'll put the money in the bank. That much gold will fetch fifty-sixty thousand. I can study on the interest. I'll take a small job on the side. Give tuitions. Do anything at all. You watch. You'll come and stay with me...

AAI: How old the gold is! All the honour of our family is contained in it dear ((Elkunchwar 184)

Here, Prabha seems very much confident about her modern life that is going to begin at city. She is ready to left old conservative mindset. Her view seems progressive. She wants to make her life meaningful by breaking the four walls under which the Deshpande women have been living. Her view is opposite to the mother. Therefore, Mother warns her that she is going to break the link from the family ancestor. The conflict can be seen between age old and modern perspectives. One more instance of modern life style but that is without a vision can be seen. Here need to see how gold can be utilized and cut the link from the culture.

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But, when Ranju, Bhaskar's young daughter elopes with her English teacher and plans to go to Bombay for a free life, the family's sense of honour is shattered. If gold has to be sold to bring Ranju back, so be it:

AAI: Let the gold go, the pest. Let the girl be found. Dear God, don't let the Deshpande honour be torn into shreds any further (190).

Once again it is possible to say that the Deshpande family sticks to the idea of family's honour through the honour of the women. Thus, while gold cannot be sold for a woman to achieve her independence, it can be sold to bring back a young woman who has gone astray so that the family honour can be maintained. Here, Mother's view seems contradictory to her own as discussed above when she warns Prabha. Now there is no question of family root with gold ornaments but the question of prestige that is important. So mother gives priority to things that is important. However, there are such characters that do not show any awareness of the changing times. Dadi represent such people.

DADI: Vyenkatesh...Arrey Vyenkatesh. I am so tired son! Time just won't move, the pest. How many more days must I live? Why are you laughing? I am so full of dread I can't tell you. Something is going wrong here. The Deshpande household is not doing well. How the mice trouble me all night. They run all over the house. The wretched creatures have dug through the whole wada. Nobody's filling up their holes. How much can I alone do? Daughters-in-law, grand-daughters-in-law, great-grandsons, they've all come. It's time I went. I have lived my life. Nothing remains. Why are you laughing like that? Why my son...(188)

Here, Time has captured Dadi tightly but it seems she has realized what is going to happen in the wada. The dust falling on her makes her realize that ages old traditional values are going to be shattered. She has been present for four generations but she is helpless to

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guide the present generation. So, Struggles of different generation at the levels of ideology can be found. The life of women is restricted. As,

AAI: Prabha, is sorrow something you show others? You keep it to yourself. If it gets too unbearable, there are enough dark rooms in this wada. You go there and let the tears flow quietly. That's what all the Deshpande women have done (Elkunchwar 181-182).

Here, Mother warns Prabha for her progressive outlook. She seems to follow the perspective of patriarchy and close the door of individual development. Therefore, it seems narrow outlook or conservative outlook dominates the progressive outlook. The cultural roots are so deep that those who want to go beyond have fear of alienation. According to Ms. Bengre, (the play) "it brings into focus the clash between the traditional and the commercial or consumer culture in modern Indian society" (Anon. 6. 4).

There are several instances in *OSM* where the characters articulate the lost opportunity of changing their lives, they are still caught up in keeping with the family tradition. This inability of the characters to act upon their thoughts seems to have been arisen out of the entanglements of relationships. Elkunchwar writes,

When the old is breaking down and the new is difficult to accept, the human being is searching for something that is constant, and what is more constant, including the tensions with which they are fraught, than human relationships? (qtd. in Gokhale 283)

Conclusion

Thus, the effects of modernization in the form of development of technology, urbanization and utilization of modern gadgets can be experienced by the Deshpande family. The effect of such things can also be visible on the cook who prefers to work in city for better financial opportunities instead of to work at the Deshpande family in small village similarly Sudhir moves from small village named Dharangaon to Mumbai for better opportunities. So

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City is an attraction to the different classes of society. But, drastic transformation cannot be visible in their condition. Sudhir who is staying in Mumbai has always financial crisis as his family has to meet middle class sophisticated lifestyle of city like education of child in English medium school. So the family members who are living in village think Sudhir is spending money for lifestyle instead of thinking it is need of the time. So conflict can be visible in narrow and broader perspectives. There is no solution of it. Further, the Deshpande family handed over gold ornaments from one generation to the next one in the form of legacy or to have identity but they had never thought of development of women out of the four walls. So conflict can be found between Prabha and family members when she wants to sell her share of gold for education and to get different opportunities for her life in city. When Ranju elopes, family is ready to sell gold to bring back her. The family is ready to cut the culture root in the form of gold. But they do not want to spoil the ages old prestige of the family. Therefore, the family seems oscillating between culture root in the form of traditional values like identity and the condition of women, gold ornaments and progressive outlook like modern education, condition of women. The solution to the clashes leads to spiral of conflicts at social and economic levels.

Therefore, Mahesh Elkunchwar's view seems important towards perspectives of the family members. "... Ancestral jewellery and the old family tractor bought in a half hearted bid to modernize both become motifs of tradition and the relentless process of decay that is endemic to a culture's movement towards modernity" (Anon. 21. 2). Further, "... *Wada* is not simply a family drama; it is more than that, a document of social change..." (Anon. 29. 3)

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