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Quest for Identity in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Apocalypse*

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In the paper I have tried to critically analyze Mahesh Elkunchwar's play "Apocalypse". In a critical study of the play, the linguistic features of the play linguistic features have been taken into consideration without having any extra-textual details of it. The script of the play and words give us an idea of the theatricality of it. What the characters speak and how they speak is a matter of concern here. The setting, the stage direction, the symbols, motifs have been taken into account. "Apocalypse" is a Marathi play translated by Shanta Gokhale. It is a part of *The Wada Trilogy*. The first two parts of it are "Old Stone Mansion" and "The Pond". "Apocalypse" is the third part of it. It takes us into the spiritual world, where one forgets about the realities of this mundane world and starts thinking about something beyond that. It is more philosophical than what it seems in the first reading. Though there is less physical action in the play yet the characters grow spiritually. They have a more mature and enlightened attitude towards life at the end of the play.

The paper focuses on the interpretation of the play "Apocalypse" by Mahesh Elkunchwar. I have tried to analyze it with a critical insight. The task of reading a play and interpreting it is interesting and exciting. In practical criticism of the play, the signs inherent in the play are to be understood by the reader without having any extra-textual details of it. The script of the play and words give us an idea of the theatricality of it. What the characters speak and how they speak is a matter of concern here. The setting, the stage direction, the symbols, motifs have been taken into account.

"Apocalypse" is a Marathi play translated by Shanta Gokhale. It is a part of *The Wada Trilogy* and has been taken from the collection. The first two parts of it are "Old Stone Mansion" and "The Pond". "Apocalypse" is the third part of it. It's a one-act play divided into four scenes. The play "Apocalypse" gives a sense of foreboding at the first reading. The opening sentence of the play "the same mansion" refers to the setting of the first two plays of the trilogy that is the mansion of Deshpandes of Dharangaon. It's an ironical expression used by the dramatist because as soon as we start plunging deeper into the play, our image of a large impressive house is lost and we are simply awestruck what we see. The dramatist mentions of timelessness in stage setting by saying, "Time: Today, tomorrow or any time in the future" (207).

Since the beginning of the play, we get the images of the hot weather such as "burning heat of summer", "billows of hot dust", "moaning of the wind", and Nandini is seen "exhausted by the heat". These images give us an idea of degeneration, barrenness, infertility of the village. Abhay, the cousin of Nandini's husband Parag, is also "knocked out by the heat" and he comes "covered in dust". The images of "parched lips" and "perspiration" indicate what is going to happen on a deeper level. Nandini is seen lost in her thoughts even when Abhay arrives there "she is oblivious to his presence". It takes few moments for her to recognize him. She "looks blankly at Abhay" which shows that his arrival was unexpected but soon she "brings herself back

from the world of stupor” and then “her face lights up with a mellow smile”, which indicates her pleasure. There is something looming large which the characters are not able to confront.

As soon as Abhay comes he demands for “water”. Nandini goes to bring a glass of water and Abhay “follows her with his eyes” as if he was inspecting something. Even when he opens his water-bag to have some water, he does not get even a drop of it which symbolizes the scarcity of water. There is the problem of drought, “lack of drinking water” as well as lack of water for daily works. On Abhay’s interrogation Nandini tells him that “it has not rained in years” and even her son “hasn’t seen rain from the day he was born”. She even mentions in her speech the long time since it has not rained. She says, “You left eight years ago, taking the rains with you” (209). Abhay calls that place “Inferno” which means hell. Since the beginning there is something ominous about this place which the writer indicates through the dialogues of Abhay and Nandini. Abhay even complains of the bus’s failure on his way so he had to set off on foot. Nandini tells him that any outsider does not want to come to this deserted place. A long pause after that shows that she reflects on the reason of Abhay’s arrival. Even the inhabitants of the village have deserted it and went to different places where they could have better life for themselves and for their children.

Throughout the play we find the motif of “water” which is the symbol of purification as Nandini’s husband Parag has gone to Kashi to immerse his grandmother’s ashes due to the lack of water in the village. Nandini says, “There isn’t a river or a lake for miles with even a palmful of water. Where could we immerse the ashes?” (209) and it indicates that something heinous has taken place in the village due to which it became barren. Abhay describes about his experiences on the way and he tells that it was a “blazing sky like a furnace” which he could see, even “the earth cracked and fissured”. He could neither see a human being nor animal just one or two skeletons but he could not tell whether it was a cow or a bull or something else. There are horrifying, awful, terrible, and gruesome images like “smearing heat”, “patches of dried blood”, “dogs attacking corpse”, “clusters of skeletons” which leave the readers’ mouth agape. Nandini informs him by saying, “There are no animals left, except for a few dogs. No birds either. People have hunted them down and eaten them all, one by one” (210). It shows the poverty as well as mercilessness of the people. The image of the “vultures wheeling overhead” is ominous. There are auditory images like “eerie sound... of the hot wind blowing and echoing” through which the playwright is able to create an atmosphere for the reader to have a horrifying image of the village. The ponds and wells have dried up. The orchards have dried up and not even brambles are left of it. Nandini’s remark that “the moon still shines over it” is symbolic of her optimism even during the utter hopeless circumstances as the dramatist has presented since the beginning. He has made her the stronghold of the family who can not be moved or shaken easily by any situation even when the truck and jewellery of the house has been sold off. Her patience is reflected through her response to Abhay’s question:

ABHAY. How do you manage?

NANDINI. Things work out, somehow. (Pause. Abhay gives her a sharp look.)

ABHAY. By selling off jewellery?

NANDINI. We sold that off first. There’s nothing more useless than ornaments.

and they'd have chafed in this heat. (212)

There is a clear reflection in the tone of Nandini that she has adapted herself to her circumstances. Abhay shows his concern when he asks, "How do you keep in touch with other people?" (211). He suggests, "You should've left long ago" (211). But Nandini is aware of one's inescapability from the realities, as she says, "And what if the same inferno awaits us elsewhere? You get used to drought too" (211). There were man-size gaps in the wall of the house that even wind enters there "like a dacoit" which is a contrast to the image of the mansion. Abhay's inspection of the house, when he goes inside the house and finds there nothing except a mat, leaves him shattered. His gestures inform that he is hurt by seeing the dire poverty of his house as he "looks long and hard at her". Nandini is not able to face him so she closes her eyes. The realization dawns on Abhay that everything has changed from the time he had left the house.

Chandu kaka's arrival gives the play a different turn. As soon as he comes, he sits in his mother's place. Even when Nandini brings water for him, he "grabs her hand". Chandu's stare at Nandini tells that he looks his own mother in her. Through Parag we come to know that he had run away from the house a long time back and Parag found him in Kashi. Chandu is the symbol of 'Everyman' who wants to escape from the worries of life. He suffers from his own failure as a man and inability to be a successful person. That's why he didn't want to come with Parag. He even resists their hold of him and when they ask him to sit "Chandu sits reluctantly and angrily". Chandu gets sad when he comes to know about the death of his mother. We come to know that he had a unique bond with his mother; even he had a premonition when he says:

My eyes had been filling with tears from the evening before. I didn't know why. The tears kept flowing even as I slept. In the morning, I felt somebody's hand touching me. I woke up to find a bird sitting on my shoulder. Then it flew off and sat before me. It followed me around all day. And in the evening, it flew across the Ganga and vanished into dark. I knew then that Aai had gone. (214)

The motif of water is significant not only for Nandini or Parag but for Chandu it becomes a necessity. When he wants to have bath and finds no water, he says, "How do you wash your sins away here without water?" (215). By having bath he wants to be purged of his sins of the past. He is one of those older generations who were escaping from their present circumstances. He is an escapist. Even Parag is aware that he was running away from something. Chandu, whose transformation is visible in the third scene, is transported to some alien land. He enters Nandini's room uninformed with blazing eyes. He looks at Nandini with "burning eyes". He was groaning and howling like a cancer patient. There is something unusual about his behaviour. Here the stage setting changes and the light changes. As the dramatist says in stage direction, "Chandu is lying curled up like a foetus. Nandini's hand is stroking his head" (232). Chandu talks only to Nandini. This is a long monologue when he talks to her but Nandini keeps silent. Abhay and Parag can not hear what he says to her. He calls Nandini Aai and confesses everything to her. He wanted shelter, warmth, love, affection, and forgiveness for his sins. In Nandini he finds that motherly care. The "pond" in the village with which he was able to relate himself, has dried up. His monologue reveals to the reader that he was pained from within. The anguish within him could find way here and he makes a confession:

The pond sustained me through my anguish. I kept my courage up knowing that the pond would take me into itself. Quench the burning fire of my life. When I

was at home, I was happy, certain that the pond existed.... But when I went out in search of it, it started eluding me. How many paths I trudged in rain and shine. In how many directions. But it continued to elude me. I walked through jungles and thorny bushes, with bruised and bloodied body, following its wild call. (233)

His condition symbolizes the loneliness of the modern man, who keeps running after the luxuries of life and at the end who find themselves alone. They desire for shelter and search for the home. Chandu also searches for home and he finds comfort in the pond and it's drying up leaves him in a shattered state. His ultimate realization that there is no place for him, which can provide him safe and secure life devoid of all troubles leads him to commit suicide. He runs away from there and his dead body is found in the pond, which was devoid of water but still it was able to provide him shelter. Parag informs about his suicide, "How he lay in the dry bed of the pond, all twisted. Fists tightly clenched. When we opened them, we saw just mud" (234). However, Parag believes that the day it will rain it will immerse the body of Chandu kaka in it and he will be purged. His death symbolizes the inevitability of death and the circle of life which comes to fulfillment with death.

It is not only Chandu, whom the readers find running away from life but Abhay, who most of the time in the play, dwells upon the inescapability of life and the certainty of death. Through his confession to Parag we come to know that throughout his life he has been in pursuit of science and knowledge. But he realizes the futility of it, "It's all rubbish! These hands have meddled enough with Nature under the name of science. Our arrogance knows no limits. We even dream of putting the best the genes together to create a superman" (216). The reader is able to understand the philosophy of life when Abhay says, "Everyone has his own idea of what a superman should be.... We are small insignificant people filled with greed, violence, malice, treachery.... What will our superman be like? And that superman will also die. Death is the only truth" (216-17).

On one hand we have the images of hot weather, drought, burning heat which has destroyed everything in the village for Parag while for Abhay everything is so cold in Sweden. Parag demands for the water to quench his thirst, for vegetation and he wants cold breeze to blow at least at night while Abhay demands for the warmth.

The second scene is set in past midnight of the same day of the first scene. The playwright chooses the midnight to give vent to the frustrations of the characters and makes them confess their guilt so that they are purged of their guilty conscience. When Abhay and Parag both talk at midnight and look at the stars. To Abhay they are like "hot coals" because he lacks the warmth and which he associates with them. While for Parag they are like "ice" because he is suffering from scorching heat. Parag's expression "How pleasantly cool it must be!" is quite contrary to what Abhay feels "Who told you that the cold is pleasant?" (220). These two contrasted characters who speak for two different directions of life give readers a message that everything exists within us. What we perceive and how we perceive is the important thing. To Abhay, cold is symbolic of death and the writer makes us feel it when he says, "... it creeps silently into your bones, your mind, your heart, your soul. Every little recess of your being begins to freeze and die" (220). Abhay dreads death. The setting of the scene two is suitable to the thoughts of Parag and Abhay who reflect on more philosophical aspects like life and death, feeling of homelessness, and up-rootedness. They are lost in the conflicts of life. Abhay is a childless father and he fears that he will die one day without having someone to carry his name

ahead. Even he cannot confront his wife Cynthia out of guilt. Parag confesses of his extra-marital relationship with Maina. Abhay is a common man who sees his future vanishing, and fears the perishability of his relationship with Cynthia due to their infertility. He believes “Once we were gone, everything that was ours would be gone” (228). This is Abhay’s childlessness which makes him fear death. He dreads the coldness, ice, snow which is associated with death. He even feels that “I would be erased like a speck off the face of the earth” (229). Though he understands that death is inevitable but he wants to defeat it by having a child. Parag, who finds life even in the worst situations of it while Abhay thinks that there is no meaning of life. He says, “What wretched happiness is there in being a mute witness to what you call the flow of life?.... Why don’t we search for the meaning of life before the hand of death falls on us?” (230). Parag finds the continuity and permanence of the existence of nature even after death and he sees pleasure in it. Parag’s attitude is of a mature person who seems to have seen life closely. His belief in the circle of life and belief in some superior power is evident here:

What difference does it make Abhay even if we don’t exist here, if we don’t leave a trace behind? Rivers will continue to flow, the sun and the moon will continue to rise, the seasons will continue to change. Life will continue its eternal flow. There is such joy in the knowledge that we were once part of this life. (229)

Abhay only sees the images of “wasteland”, “snowflakes” in nature around him. Since the time he has arrived at Parag’s house, his observation of the village, the house where he once lived and the relationship of Nandini and Parag makes him feel that he is an intruder, an outsider there. The feeling, the sacrifice, emotions, community feeling which he finds here in Nandini and Parag, he doesn’t get in Sweden. That’s why when Parag goes to help to carry the bier, Abhay laughs hysterically. He does not laugh at somebody else but it echoes his own emptiness, and his hollowness. Abhay is unable to understand a mutual understanding between Parag and Nandini and therefore he says, “Often you’re not even looking at each other; but it seems as if a continuous dialogue is going on between you” (225). Through Parag’s speeches and dialogues we come to know his feeling for others, his helpfulness, his charity, and consideration for his villagefolk. His community feelings and sense of responsibility leads him to help others even in the midst of utter poverty. When on one hand there are people like Abhay who escape from the village for the betterment of their future and Chandu who escape from the realities of life, there are very few like Parag who stick to their place. His sense of attachment is very clear when he says, “A faceless, wretched, impoverished village, like ten thousand others. I might even have gone away, but this drought struck and began to devastate it before my eyes. Then my feet dug in even more firmly. They couldn’t be faithless” (222). Through Parag’s long monologue in scene two, we come to know about the devastation of the village and how it took place. How they used to spend their lives together in the village but gradually due to the lack of rain, they moved to other places. It is through Abhay and Parag’s dialogism, readers come to know about many of their problems as well as their causes. One of the many problems was the problem of deforestation for which Parag considers himself responsible. Sometimes from his dialogue it seems as if he is repenting of his deeds of the past. People have cut down the teak trees. Parag remembers that he has done the same to others, so he has no right to complain to others. He was sent to jail for the smuggling of teak trees. Even his conversation with Abhay reveals that he felt freer there. Their dialogues reveal this fact:

PARAG. Hadn’t I felled other people’s teak? I couldn’t lift a finger against them.

who came and took it away.

ABHAY. When did this sainthood begin? When you were breaking stones in jail?

PARAG. How can I explain to you how free I began to feel within the four walls of the prison? All the fear, shame and anger in me burnt away. That was the price I had to pay. (221)

This is his guilty conscience, which keeps haunting him. It forces the reader also to think that the freedom comes from within and not from outside. It is a mental construct and one's own conscience plays part in it.

Nandini seems to be the symbol of hope. It is she who is seen protecting all the other three major characters of the play in the midst of chaos and confusion. It is she who gives answer to Abhay's questions. At the end of the scene two, she looks at Abhay as if she is teaching him a lesson. Nandini's response to Abhay's question is very thoughtful and significant. She says, "Why should there be questions when you turn yourself into the answer?" (230). She is the symbol of strength, courage and charity. If like a Vahini, she is able to teach and help Abhay then as a supportive wife she motivates Parag by giving him gentle touch of love and affection. He buries his face in her hair and breathes deeply and thus he feels relieved of all the worries. To Chandu, she turns herself into a motherly figure. She strokes his head like a child is taken care by his mother when Chandu lies curled up like a foetus.

There is less action that takes place and very little happens throughout the play. It is only through the dialogues of the characters the past of these characters come to the front. The characters reveal themselves through their dialogues. There are many problems which the dramatist brings forth through them. On the surface level, there is the problem of deforestation, the growing communication gap between younger and older generation. Abhay's lack of concern for Chandu kaka makes it obvious. The dramatist does not merely leave us to think about them but he takes us to the deeper level. There is the theme of existentialism, alienation, and futility of life. At this age of development and advancement, people keep running after money and progress. In this process they lose touch with their roots and their origins. They find themselves lost in the world without having any affiliation, association and purpose of life. They question their own existence in this world. They are lonely even in the crowd of so many people. In his philosophy of existentialism Mahesh Elkunchwar seems to be influenced by Sartre and Camus.

When the play opens, it is set in noon time. The last scene is set in the morning. At this time, it seems that Abhay and Chandu kaka both have gone through a period of eclipse during night and both of them have reached to their desired places in the morning. Chandu commits suicide, who could not find piece in this world and Abhay who has decided what to do and says that "I'll make a move" (235). Nandini understands and that's why she says, "Take care. It's a long journey" (235).

The title of the play corresponds with the theme. As "Apocalypse" in Marathi is Yugant and that means the end of an age, it signifies that there is the end and revival of something. The references of death are found throughout the play. But death is not the end of life but a beginning of new life. With death, one life comes to the fulfillment and another life comes into existence in

form of a new body. This play is not nihilistic in approach but gives us a broader understanding of life and its importance. The image of the village as a barren land reminds us of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, where in the first section "The Burial of the Dead" he describes a place "where the sun beats", "the dead tree gives no shelter", "the dry stone no water". The yearning for rain and water is evident in the fifth section "What the Thunder Said" of *The Wasteland*. In the fifth section of it even "sweat is dry" and there is "dry sterile thunder without rain". But when it rains it rejuvenates everyone. Here also water is the symbol of hope, reconciliation, repentance and rebirth. The motif of water is significant as only water can quench the thirst of a living as well as dead. With water the people will wash away their sins and that's why it becomes the need of all the characters in the play also.

The play has three unities of time, place and action. It completes within twenty four hours of the day. Throughout the play, the place remains the same and that is the mansion (house) of Parag and Nandini. There is not much physical action but the characters grow up spiritually. There is no sub-plot in the play. There is the frequent use of silences and pauses, which help the characters to reflect on their life. Sometimes the dramatist uses them when he does not want to convey something to his readers directly but leaves them to understand on their own. As this play has originally been written in Marathi, still it seems the translator has tried his best to keep touch with the original. He has retained some Marathi words also in the text like Vahini (bhabhi), Bhauji (brother or brother in law), Kaka (father's younger brother), Aji (the grandmother), Aai (mother) etc.

Thus, having analyzed the play "Apocalypse", we can say that it is more than what the characters actually say and act. It takes us into the spiritual world, where one forgets about the realities of this mundane world and starts thinking about something beyond that. It is more philosophical than what it seems in the first reading. The practical analysis of the play helps us in understanding it better without being biased and without being hampered by the cultural and social milieu of the author.

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