

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 12 December 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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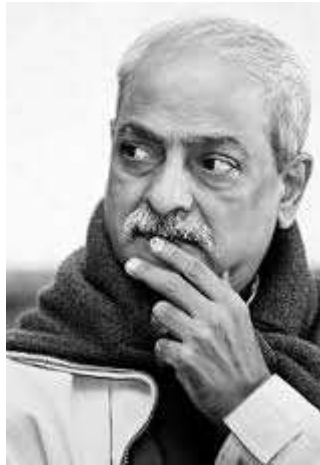
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Mahesh Elkunchwar's

Flower of Blood – Turmoil of an Aging Mother and Woman

A. Sunkanna, M.A. M.Phil., Ph.D.



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[http://www.indianetzone.com/30/mahesh elkunchwar indian theatre personality.htm](http://www.indianetzone.com/30/mahesh_elkunchwar_indian_theatre_personality.htm)

Mahesh Elkunchwar

Mahesh Elkunchwar's name is now synonymous with the great tradition of playwriting in Marathi. His name is often invoked in the same breath as that of

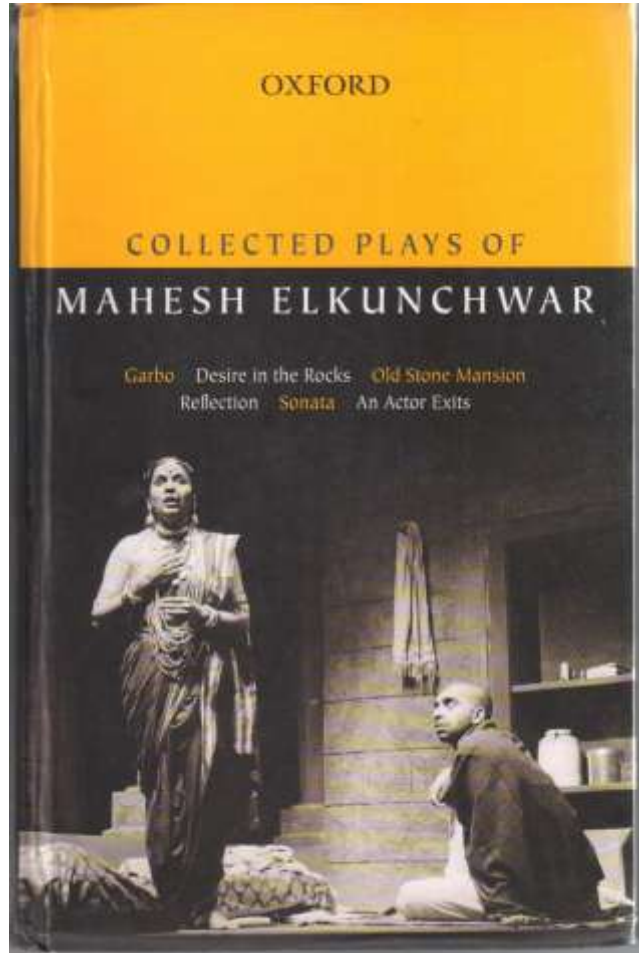
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playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar and Satish Alekar. His plays in *The Wada Trilogy* had a very successful run and have come to be regarded as the canonical texts of Marathi literature.



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.

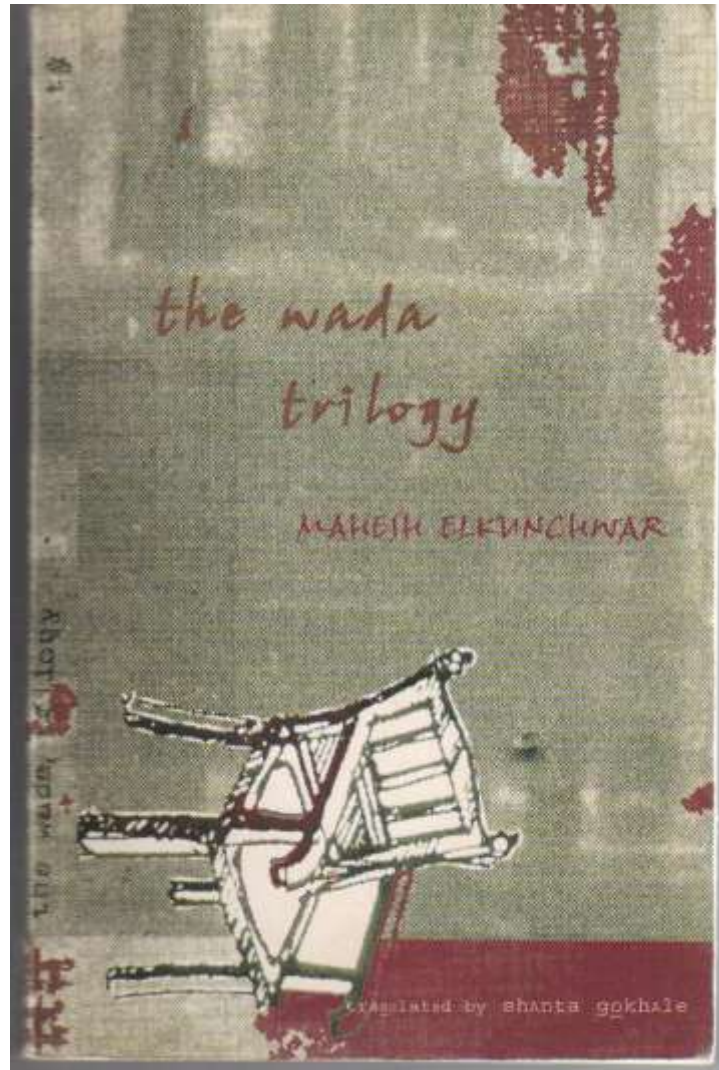
The Wada Trilogy

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Even though families like the Deshpandes are on their last leg, *The Wada Trilogy* is a set of important plays, because it deals with the sense of tradition that is so deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. His plays question the cohesiveness of a joint family by telling the story from the point of view of the “outsiders” or characters forced to leave the family at various points. With this trilogy, Mahesh Elkunchwar achieves a feat unique to playwriting in this country: developing a cycle which moves between many registers to unfold the evolving history of a family in present-day India mirroring the social and cultural shifts and changes that mark the twentieth century.

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Memory of Their Own Past and Financial Penury

From *Old Stone Mansion* to *The Pond* and to *Apocalypse*, we follow the fortunes and struggles of the Deshpandes of Dharangaon, once highly respected and well-off landed gentry, now caught between the memory of their own genteel past and the financial penury of the present. As members of several generations come to terms with their past and future in drastically different ways, we see an image of India negotiating its way through modernity.

Evaluating the Women Characters

One can evaluate women characters in the plays from two perspectives, Traditional and feminist. This essay endeavours to look at woman characters from feminist perspective.

Versatility of Mahesh Elkunchwar

Mahesh Elkunchwar deals with the theme of feminist perspective in one of his plays *Flower of Blood*. The earlier plays – *Party*, *Garbo*, *The Breath of Scandal* position him as an *absurd* dramatist. But his versatility is not limited to the absurd theatre. *Flower of Blood* reveals his varied taste and interest in keeping a watchful eye on the latest developments in the psychic

“I am more interested, in an individual’s problems, his inner life, and his anguish. The psyche of an unhappy disturbed person interests me more than social problems. Social problems do not interest me really, because they have solutions. The human mind is unfathomable. It is the kind of material that’s never exhausted.” (VII)

***Flower of Blood* – An Experimental Play**



Flower of Blood can be called an experiment through a male playwright, he portrays the inner conflicts of a woman with passion and compassion. Samik Bandyopadhyaya observes on *Flower of Blood* and *Reflection* thus:

Both plays deal with paying guests and their Homelessness- and sexlessness. The stronger women who 'host' them and make demands on them, and ultimately drive them to an emotional crisis grow into a metaphor for the city life itself with its almost sexual magnetism confronting the outsider looking for a private place in the city. The women

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in their exploitive ruthlessness use sex as a weapon in their assault on the all too vulnerable privacy of the men. The games the women play are, a burlesque sex than variants on the game itself. However persistently, Elkunchwar Discounts the social reference, it is the social matrix that Looms large over the melodrama of the shy little men who never quite grow up in Elkunchwar's plays. (VII)

Padma - Scared of Growing Old

In the play, Padma was in her early fifties and is scared of growing old. She feels insecure with Leelu's arrival. Her rivalry disables her to communicate with her. And even her husband Bhau seems to have become far removed far. She plunges into depression after the death of her only son. She has respect for her son, even though he passed away physically. He is living in the temple of her heart, and she would see her son in the personification of Raja, the paying guest at her house.

Indian culture considers motherhood to be sacred. And society has placed certain rules and regulations for woman in general. After becoming a wife her sexual feelings have to be repressed. A girl while growing up, learns about sex from her friends but she realizes that only adult married people can indulge in it in privacy. She never sees her parents spend any time together during the day. While growing up, she also hears about epic tales which reveal the stories of women who are praised, because they suppressed their burning desires. But nowadays, the girl is being tempted to a certain kind of life by movies and magazines. According to tradition, a girl is supposed to experience her first romantic impulses only after she meets her husband. If she experiences this emotion outside marriage, it is sinful.

Opening of the Play

It is evening when the play opens, and cordiality is absent between Padma and her husband Bhau. He tries to start a conversation, but his efforts fail as Padma refuses to be drawn into any discussion. Her discontent with life is manifested in the very first scene itself. Padma doesn't like her daughter's attitude towards Raja, the paying guest, since

she wants him to be a substitute husband. Padma always feels herself in a vicious circle. In order to escape from this, she finds Raja as her way out. For Bhau, Raja is merely a paying guest, and he feels, Raja is being treated rather too decently. But, for Padma, he is one of the family members, and she refuses to collect rent from him. It reminds us of Pinter's Meg who treats Stanely as one of the family members because of her childlessness.

Mental Agony

Padma is under treatment when the play opens. It, perhaps, is a mental agony, triggered by the death of her only son. As she is suffering from mental agony, she takes medicines regularly. It makes her feel weak. So, she stops taking medicines to become strong, and sometimes throws the pills outside the window. Actually Padma is not interested in talking to her husband and daughter. When Bhau gets irritated she asks,

Do I insist that you talk to me? Do you know why I want
Raja in this house? He's the only one who cares to talk to me of
His own accord, with sincerity. That's why, or else between
The two of you'd have driven me mad with your indifference.
How should I pass my days? Tell me how, How? (5)

Hypocritical Patriotism in Agony

It is then Padma reveals the cause of her irritation towards her daughter. She says that taking too many medicines is responsible for it. She also reveals that it is Shashi's twenty-third birthday. She is proud of her son who went to war. It echoes the universal cry of mothers. She wants him to come back in any state. Her patriotism, as she herself admits is all lie. This is the absurdity of the situation. But, now she is so obsessed with her loss that she wallows in grief. She is shocked to find Leelu and Bhau talking of silk sarees on this day. In fact Bhau could go to the club, and Leelu could sit at home and eat, shocks her. Padma character also finds a parallel in Martha's *Who's Afraid of Virginia*

Woolf. Like Martha, Padma can't accept the fact that she has no son. Both of them reveal an urge to escape from reality.

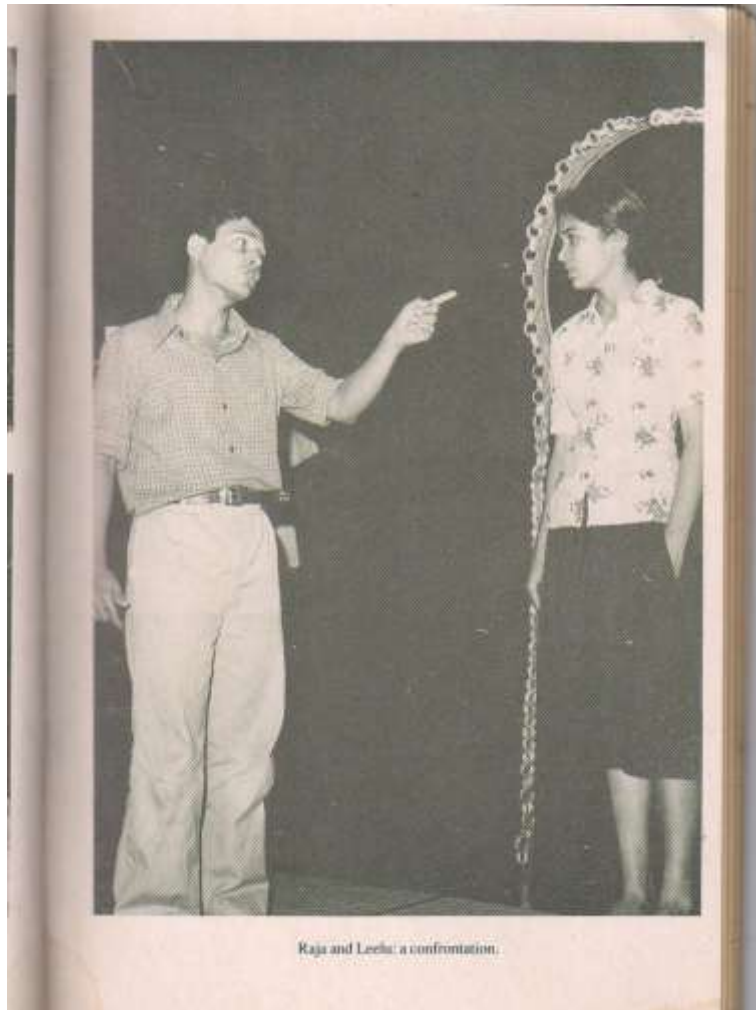
Grasping the Illusion

For Padma, Raja is the illusion which she tries to grasp. Sometimes, she looks upon him as her son and sometimes her sexual urge comes to the fore, she might have wanted him to a large extent as her sexual object in a non-physical sense. She is unable to reconcile both, the maternal as well as sexual instincts, so she indulges in "Absurdio Reduction." The term reveals that though she argues illogically, she thinks that she is logical. Her conversation with Bhau reveals,

Why are you looking at me like that? As if you'd seen a
ghost. I know exactly what's going on in your mind. Look
at her all decked out in silks after the fuss made! (pause)
But I've decided now to do as you say. I am not going to
lose myself in grief. I'll pretend he's still alive. That's
Why I have worn this. You are not angry, are you?" (31)

Words and Actions Do not Correspond

Padma thinks that with the arrival of Raja, there would be some new interest. She even suspects the relationship between Leelu and Raja.



There is no correspondence between Padma's words and her actions. She feels jealous of her daughter, and says always it is like her brother. It reminds us the heroine Mrs. Stokes *In A Night Out* _ She doesn't like her son talking to any woman. She always wants him to be with her. Padma dresses up in a Benares saree to impress Raja. Though she has to wallow in grief, having lost her son, she is unable to do so. Her own inability makes her very angry when she hears Bhau and Leelu discussing marriage and sarees.

Character in an Absurd Theatre – Comparison with the Professor in *The Lesson*

Like all the characters in the absurd theatre, Padma doesn't conform to the role model of a mother. She can be compared to the professor in Ionesco's *The Lesson*. A professor's duty is to teach, but he, as the giver of knowledge, tries to bring all under his dominance. In order to show this power, the pupil is raped and murdered. Thus the role

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model of a teacher is destroyed. In the same way Padma as a mother is stripped of her role. She is shown by Elkunchwar as a woman who is unable to suppress her sexual urge, in order to find fulfillment through a maternal role.

A Hint of Regret

Padma, sometimes in her inner moods, realizes that the death of their son affects Bhau also. But, like all men, he has bottled up his feelings. There are times when Padma feels as an outsider in the family. There is a hint of regret even as she watches Bhau and Leelu having a very lively discussion. She is so much pre-occupied with her own grief that she fails to reach out any relationship. Padma is also conscious of her age - she always wants a constant reassurance from someone that she is not old really but pretty. Raja knows very well how to make her happy, and instinctively lies when she asks about her age. Even a little remark about her grey hair makes her irritable, and she launches on a little speech about her looks in a way to reassure herself. Padma says,

That has nothing to do with the age. It started going grey soon after Shashi's birth. Giving birth is like being born again. That is when my hair started falling as well. You should have seen me before that, You won't believe it if I told you...I was quite a beauty in my youth, you know... In those days my hands used to be sheer silk like rose petals."

(15)

Assuming Raja as a Substitute Husband

Padma accepts Raja in the place of Shashi. Even Leelu says a word regarding the tea that is offered to her; Padma offers it to Raja who has just come to house.

Raja on the other hand, shows very good affection towards Padma. He shows a bit of consideration and asks her to take pills- spontaneously Padma clings to this affection, and says no one would have said a thing like that in the house. Padma would like to adopt Raja not as a son, but a substitute husband in her deep thoughts. But, she comes back to reality from this illusion when Raja says, "But she is different, after all she's my

mother.” She is reluctant to see Raja’s mother in herself, because she is scared that even this emotional impulse would be snatched away from her.

A Hidden Sexuality

But deep within the show of maternal affection, there is a hidden sexuality. Padma wants to reveal it in the power of sexuality through Raja. But her marital relationship with Bhau might have destroyed her sexually. Though later on, she tries to revive these old feelings and join together with Bhau in love, it is impossible. But Bhau reminds her of her dislike for sex in these lines,

Sometimes you’d fall asleep in Leelu’s room. Other times
you’d take such a long time getting ready for bed. You may
think I didn’t notice, but I did when you went for your baths
in the middle of the night.” (13)

Manifestation of Sexuality

This sexuality which Padma suppresses within herself comes out in other forms. Leelu gets those letters wherein Padma had poured her feelings. Even before these letters are seen, we observe Padma’s vain attempt to entice Raja. Raja feels the heat of sexuality, and wants to escape from it.

Another Emotional Character - Leelu

At the end of the play the fact is seen that she is alone in this world and she has to depend on her husband. The other woman character in the play is Leelu, a young girl who is in the crisis of growing up. Hers is an adolescent situation wherein she has problems understanding her own mother. She tells her father that she is unable to understand how to move with her mother. Even if she keeps quiet, her mother flies into rage. Another feeling within Leelu is that her mother is more taken up with her brother. And as a consequence, she resents Raja, as she feels he has occupied her brother’s place. She underrates Raja by comparing him with Shashi:

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I'm only telling you because Aai keeps saying a hundred times over, He's like Shashi to me, he's like Shashi to me; well, you're not. See? ... Nobody can take Shashi—dada's place. You can't. There is no way you can.(viciously) He never was a sissy like you. He was six feet tall. Kept hitting his head against the top of the door way. And what a sports man. He won university colours. When he laughed the walls used to tremble. And hundreds of friends he had. And your? The minute classes are over, you follow your nose straight back home. (23)

Her mother's excessive love for Raja makes Leelu jealous of him, though she doesn't want to admit it to him.

Awakening of Young Hearts

The playwright, Mahesh Elkunchwar brings the beautiful scene of the awakening of young hearts in the play. In contrast with the dusk which Padma tries in her vain attempt to evoke his desire, this time the room fills gradually with the golden light of the evening. After The bud of love slowly awakens as the conversation indicates,

“Leelu : Raja,
Raja : Yes?
Leelu : What were you going to say?
Raja : Nothing.
Leelu : Raja, are we doing something wrong?
Raja : Why?
Leelu : I think we are talking a lot of rubbish.
About love and things like that.” (28)

It is later on, after seeing Padma entering Raja's room, and after reading the letters, Leelu comes to a wrong conclusion.

Raja, the Paying Guest

Raja, the paying guest is as weak-minded as HE of Reflection. HE is the object which gives satisfaction to the lady of the house. But like HE, Raja is also scared of physicality. Raja comes from a village, and even though he is bright, he feels insecure in the company of his classmates. It is to Leelu that he opens up his heart and reveals his hesitation in company. Bhau, the other male character is depicted as a self-effacing person. Even though, Padma creates a lot of tensions in the family, it is Bhau who defends her. And in the end it is he, who is seen caressing the broken Padma.

A Significant Theme

This play is based on a significant theme. Elkunchwar, in this play, reveals that not only is *Absurdity* his forte, but even the feminist aspect of life touches his heart strings very deeply.

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