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## Female Characters in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion* - A Critique

B. S. Jadhav, Ph.D.

B. B. Rajurkar, Ph.D. Candidate



Mahesh Elkunchwar

### Elkunchwar, A Prominent Marathi Playwright

A new dramatist to shoot into fame in recent years is Mahesh Elkunchwar. Elkunchwar came into prominence by his one-act-plays, which display a rare blend of strength, intensity and concentration. His success in exploiting the potentialities of the medium has been hailed as historic. He has written more than 15 plays in Marathi most of which have been translated into Indian and Western languages like English, French and German. *Old Stone Mansion*, *Sultan*, *Holi* and *Party* are his famous plays. He has won national and international awards like the 'Sahitya Akademi Award', 'Sarswati Samman' and the 'Birmingham Fellowship'.

### *Old-Stone Mansion*, A Realistic Play

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*Old-Stone Mansion* (1989) (*Wada Chirebandi*) is a family centered realistic play. The prominent women characters are Aai, Vahini, Prabha, Dadi and Ranju. These women characters show family attachment and community bonds prevailing in the Maharashtrian society. They display feminine sensibilities in their behavior. The objective of this research paper is to analyze the female characters in terms of their actions and behaviour.

### **Mansion – An Idiom**



The noun *Wada* literally means ‘mansion’. In addition to wealth, it signifies propriety, self-sufficiency, and authority. *Chirebandi* is an adjective meaning ‘solid, hewn from stone’.

Relating the play *Old-Stone Mansion* (*Wada Chirebandi*) to his own family origins in his 1985 theatre academy address, Mahesh Elkunchwar describes the deteriorating Brahman *wada* as a post-colonial site where an unusable past meets an intolerable present and from which the only escape is departure:

“The collapse of the wada (as an institution) did not affect us, because all of us left home early. But all around me I watched the other wadas crumbling and people being crushed under them. In the period after independence, I could see very clearly the slow, agonizing death of Brahman families, especially in villages. This process is not yet over” (Jadhav 89).

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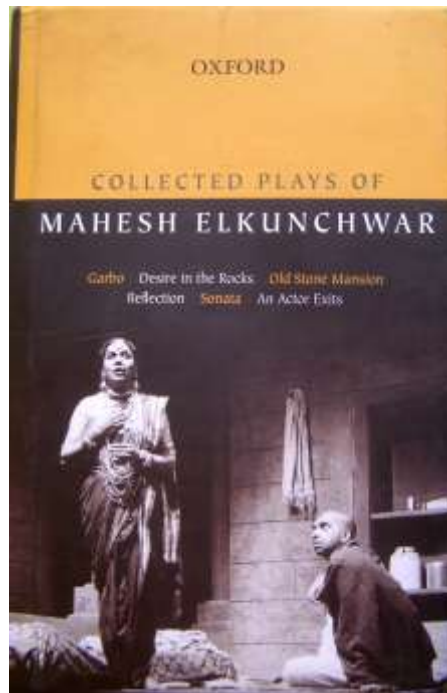
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## Identical Setting and Subject



Home is both setting and subject in *Old-Stone Mansion*. Dilapidated mansion is the obsessive center of family discourse and a constant source of anxiety. The transformation of home into anti-home – a place of oppression, resentment and anxiety rather than nurture and support – is mainly the result of inflexible attitudes to caste within the Wada (Dharwadkar 295).

### Female Characters

The female characters in the plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar, Vijay Tendulkar and Jaywant Dalvi play a vital role in the history of Marathi Theatre (Deshmukh 14).

In *Old-Stone Mansion* female characters are more influential than the male characters. All characters in the play are representatives of some human tendencies, nature, and mentality. They are part of life-experiences and symbols of human tendency. After the death of her husband, Aai puts away all responsibility and confines herself to the interior room and gives the keys to Vahini. This symbolizes transformation of power from the old generation to the young generation. All female characters in this play are victims of patriarchy and the Indian social set up. Through these female characters the playwright highlights the role of a woman in keeping the joint family alive (Koranne 76).

Elkunchwar presents various kinds of women in the *Old-Stone Mansion* and portrays the feminine role in a joint family. *Old-Stone Mansion* brings out various dimensions of woman in the Indian family set up. The playwright projects success as well as failures of woman in this play. We come across a variety of woman characters in this play: Dadi, the ninety year old blind grandmother who remains blissfully unaware of the death of her son Venkatesh and goes on asking for the time; Aai having a religious bent of mind, a devotional wife, modern

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yet a modest woman who believes in joint family; Vahini, a caring mother; Anjali, a victimized woman and Prabha and Ranju, rebellious female characters. Elkunchwar's mastery over character presentation is unique in the field of Marathi Theatre (Deshmukh 162).

### **Aai, a Symbol of Tolerance and Accommodation**

Aai is a woman who likes to live life according to the present as it is. She never thinks of past and future. She is a woman who accepts contemporary reality. She accepts all such changes thoughtfully. The motivation of love is the real basis of Aai's action in the play. Aai is motivated to sacrifice her life for her family only because of her love and affection to her kith and kin. Behind every act of Aai lies the female sensibility of an Indian woman. Modesty is her tragic flaw. She is too innocent to the ways of the world.

PRABHA Willingly you gave away your land for mortgage?  
AAI Prabha...  
PRABHA In your own house, you will live like an unwelcome outsider.  
AAI What could I have done? You tell me.  
PRABHA You are too innocent (42-43)

Aai is a symbol of tolerance. She tolerates all evils of the joint family and yet, has a particular vision to look towards the sorrows and sufferings of life. She doesn't want to show her sorrow. She prefers to suffer lonely in the corner of a room. She has also a particular outlook towards happiness. She has courage to accept all odds coming in her way. She has strength to endure sorrow and the blows of situation. She wishes others' happiness but she never craves for it for herself. She doesn't expect anything from others. She is a devoted, loving, caring woman who cares for others' wellbeing. Aai – the word 'Aai' (mother) is in itself an embodiment of love, compassion and sympathy. Her name in itself is the reflection of her personality.

Elkunchwar justified her character in the play by giving her a leading role in action (Koranne 220). Aai has a moral sense and being an embodiment of love tries to give warmth of love and affection to each and every member of the family. She becomes unhappy by the dispute among the family members over the issue of expenses for rites and so offers to sell her ornaments to perform rituals. She is an all-pervasive character who never blames or goes against anybody in the play. She never utters even a single bad word to anybody. (Deshmukh 158)

CHANDU Aai. It's your money, keep it for yourself.  
AAI Arrey. What do I need it for? He had given it to me before he died. I had kept it away so that it would come in useful at times of need. His money. Let it be used for his Shradh (15).

### **A Suppressed Woman under Religious Status**

Aai is a suppressed woman under the garb of religious status. As a holy, devoted and homesick wife, she is suppressed in the joint family. She accepts and performs all traditional Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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rituals with great devotion and without any resentment. She is a modest woman yet she suffers a lot in the play. Modesty is her tragic flaw. Her predicament makes her a victim of family. The playwright highlights home and family as a psychological support for a woman and so she responds to the reaction of family members in a positive manner.

SUDHIR Arrey, where will I get the money? Instead, let`s not spend all that much on useless rituals.

BHASKAR And have people laugh at me? Nothing doing.

AAI Bhaskar... (All are startled.) Sell off that portion at the Back.

CHANDU/PRABHA Aai...

AAI Arey. What do I need it for?

BHASKAR People will say we ruined our mother (36).

PRABHA Aai. What is a thousand or two these days?

AAI Love always runs ahead, my dear. I have no expectations from anyone. I have only one wish. Let the Lord take me away soon. (Pause) My heart breaks for Chandu. He toils like a beast of burden. Poor boy. He has no education or a family. He has no one to call his own. Because you did not marry, he too has remained single. He may face bad times in future, he may fall ill, he may be in pain – I worry a lot about him (43-44).

### **Degeneration of the Big Mansion**

Aai is an eyewitness of the degeneration of the big mansion. She lives in nostalgia. Tolerance and endurance is a natural trait of an Indian woman. She never loses temper on common matters. She is a devotional woman. Her sacrifice for the joint family is praiseworthy (Koranne 74). Patience, love, forgiveness and a spirit of sacrifice are the most important virtues of motherhood and they are found in Aai. Her love is an everlasting source of happiness for her children (Jadhav 20).

In *Old-Stone Mansion*, Aai is the most powerful and strong female character. Her strength lies in her stoicism and confrontation with the odds and sorrows in life (Kamlesh 234). She lives in the present rather than in the past. She knows the inevitability of sorrows in life and accepts life with courage. She never shows her suffering and agony to other family members. She accepts the bitter life experiences in a calm manner. Being a free and fearless woman she is the most impressive character in the play.

### **Many-sided Symbol**

Aai is a symbol of motherhood who protects the children from the evils of the society. She is an admixture of pity, simplicity and agony and suffering for others is in her nature. Aai`s journey from a woman to the basic nature of ‘motherhood’ which Elkunchwar portrayed is rare in the history of Marathi Theatre (Kamlesh 235). She performs all duties of an Indian woman in her family. Aai transcends her ego and becomes a true embodiment and symbol of motherhood. She protects her family in all odds. She is a large hearted woman who suffers a lot but never loses her courage to fight against evils around her. Her sacrifice for family is extraordinary and her fall in the play is the most tragic one.

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## Vahini - Many Roles

Vahini is an elder sister-in-law and she is eager to take responsibility of the mansion but at the same time is bewildered about her capability. Elkunchwar has portrayed the character of Vahini realistically. She has all shades of colour in her personality. She plays the role of a mother, wife, and sister-in-law in a very skillful manner. She is an admixture of love and selfishness. Vahini is a dangling woman between tradition and modernity. She is caught in between convention and reality. She loves antique things only to showcase them.

She is well aware of her responsibility at home (*Wada*/ mansion). She is concerned about the well-being of her family and doesn't hesitate to ask her brother-in-law Sudhir to extend helping hands to support the family. She is a caring woman, who is anxious about her children's progress. She feels the anxiety for her son's addiction of liquor and the marriage of her daughter. Throughout the play she behaves in a sensible manner. She plays a pivotal role in understanding familial problems and tries to solve them with mutual understanding. She has the maturity and open heartedness by which she keeps relations intact among the family members. She frankly acknowledges the mistakes committed by her children and yet is unable to control the damage.

- VAHINI        It's her tenth class. The girl has failed twice. She must get through this time – the nuisance.
- PRABHA        Get rid of this teacher first. He comes to teach –whistling.
- VAHINI        So what?
- PRABHA        He teaches free. Ranju is getting on to seventeen. Think about it.
- VAHINI        Don't talk nonsense.
- PRABHA        You will regret it. I tell you all this because as it is Ranju is interested in other things. You will find her in front of the mirror all the time. Or she is gadding about town. We were not allowed to step out of the door (18-19).

## Anjali, a Self-sufficient Woman: Avoiding Responsibilities

Anjali, who is a self-sufficient woman, is Sudhir's Bombay-born Konkani wife. She is a liminal figure who was ostracized by the family for years because of her different cultural background. In the course of the play, the politics within the family becomes polarized around the geopolitical terms "*Varhad*" (the vernacular Marathi name for Vidarbha region) and "*Konkan*" (the coastal strip between the Deccan plateau and the Arabian sea).

- ANJALI        I am not going to tell you. Once again you'd say that the Konkanis are always instigating quarrels.
- SUDHIR        You have a complex about being a Konkani (16-17).

The family resents Anjali's indifference to its many troubles, but the ambivalence of belonging/not belonging and the insidious power of place emerge at the end when she unknowingly lapses into local forms of speech.

PRABHA        Now don't you start wailing about the poverty you live in.

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No one will go to your house –will that satisfy you? You really are a diehard Konkani...

ANJALI She always taunts me about my upbringing as a Konkani. I am used to cooking the way we do it in Bombay. Here. There are so many people, I can't manage. If there is a shortage of something that's enough of an excuse for her to start on my forefather from Konkan (17).

Anjali is totally different from Vahini, she avoids family responsibility. She behaves objectively in the family. All family members think that Anjali is an outsider. She is *Konkanastha* and behaves in the *Konkanastha* way. She is introvert and avoids contacts with Prabha and Parag. Her faith in human kindness is aroused when she accepts the traditional way of life. Her transformation from a modern woman to a loving, affectionate, caring woman is a symbol of the typical Indian woman who believes in the joint family tradition (Deshmukh 160). To keep the Indian family system alive, women play a vital role. Elkunchwar underlines the role of females in this play.

### **Prabha – a Thought Provoking Personality**

Prabha's character in this play is a thought provoking one. Patriarchal family and social tradition ruin her life. She is a victim of social taboos and social norms. The Indian tradition to belittle the talent of girls is underlined by the dramatist through the character of Prabha. Taty's decision not to send her to school is one example. Though she is a brilliant girl, she is kept away from education (Koranne 75). She is a suffering soul in the joint family. Nobody cares for her future. Everyone is engrossed in their own welfare. She never forgets that she is ruined because of her father's vain glory and the hollow pride of the family. She desires to take a B. A. Degree from Amravati but gets no opportunity.

PRABHA (wounded) Aai, I want to study. Let me at least do my B.A.

AAI It's not in my hands, Prabha.

PRABHA Somehow help me to live in the city for four years.

AAI Prabha, sorrow is not something one puts on display. It belongs to oneself. When it is unbearable – there are many dark rooms in this mansion where one can go and shed tears quietly. All Deshpande women have done that.

PRABHA I won't. I shall fight for my happiness. I shall fight for your happiness, too.

AAI Prabha, when I could not get happiness, I myself waved goodbye to it. If you do not get something you want, it's best to reject it, my dear.

PRABHA Aai, let me study. Let me stand on my own feet. Then we can live together, We do not have to pass our days expecting charity from others, Let me go to Amravati. (43)

AAI Prabha, it's true, really. We have spoilt your life. You were the cleverest of all the children. But then what can one do in the face of a man's nature? He never allowed any opinion but his own to prevail. Education is of no use to a girl, that was his refrain. How many times I pleaded with him. God is my witness. I said, times have changed. How many girls who were with you have studied

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further, have gone ahead. They are holding jobs. They are earning. I really admire them. But then, we villagers never had that vision at that time. (44)

### Slow and Gradual Strangulation

The image of slow strangulation within the *Wada* is that of Prabha and Chandu, Bhaskar's unmarried middle-aged siblings, who were tragically denied higher education and modern occupations because such independence would have compromised the family prestige. Aai's concern for Chandu makes her restless.

AAI            How much more are you going to suffer? You toil in the house. You toil in the fields. You have held the whole household in the palm of your hand. You run it. What is going to happen to you my dear? Does it hurt – your foot? (52)

### Ranju's Elopement

Ranju is the youngest female character in the play. She is seventeen and is struggling in the tenth class. Being a romantic girl she elopes with her tutor with all the family gold and so her doors of development get closed forever. Her life becomes directionless. On her return she locks herself in a dark room. One aspiring soul becomes a victim of social status and social norms. Ranju is a self-centered fantasist.

RANJU        You know, in that film *Coolie* Amitabh carries in things just like this. Why don't you go into the movies, Chandu Kaka?

CHANDU      Then who will do the work here?

RANJU        Hey Anju Kaku, have you seen Amitabh?

ANJALI(busy)Hm...

RANJU        Really?

ANJALI(alert)What? Me? Why should I go to see him?

RANJU        When he was ill – I fasted on five Saturdays. If something had happened to him – I would have taken my life. Sudhir Kaka, have you seen Amitabh?

SUDHIR      Hm. Of course, he comes every day to the milk centre for milk.

RANJU        That's a bluff.

SUDHIR      It's true, really. Jaya too comes to borrow something or the other every other day.

RANJU        But these stars are so rich...aren't they? Kaka, where is the Rajkamal Studios?

SUDHIR      Rajkamal? Right behind our house. Now go, get me some tea.

### The Medley

Dadi -- the old grandmother who has gone blind, is completely unaware of the death of her son Venkatesh. While her daughter in law (Aai) and the rest are busy with the post-funeral ceremonies, she is blissfully unaware of the things going around. She often calls Venkatesh and goes on asking for the time. Dadi is at the backdrop of the action in the play and is concerned about the rats and their holes which no one fills. The mud from the roof falls on her and is suggestive of the decadence. Dadi is time, and also the silent spectator who sees Time flit by in front of her eyes (Elkunchwar, Interview). For Samik Bandyopadhyay, Dadi's Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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asking for time is an evocation of Time stuck still. She utters, “ I have been driven beyond my depth. The daughters-in-law have come. The granddaughters-in-law have come. Great grandsons have arrived! Now give me leave”(50). Prabha has her own individuality. She is a long-suffering stoic woman in the play (Koranne75). Her tolerant nature is her tragic flaw. Prabha is a case of chronic suicide (Kamlesh p.237). Emotions of anger, hatred and frustration, and a loss of the sense of belonging make her a tragic figure in the play. A young sinking lady and the sinking/rusting tractor are symbols of ruin in the play. They are caught in the vortex of the *Old-Stone Mansion* tradition. Ranju is a modern girl. She elopes with her tutor but fails to establish her happy home and comes back to the mansion with a broken heart. She feels lonely and secluded in the stone mansion. Her attempt to escape from the age old traditions and her rebellious nature and modern aspirations of life do not succeed. Ranju`s love for romantic life is nothing but her youthful fancy and immature nature.

### **Protectors of Traditions and Conventions**

*Old-Stone Mansion* is there only because of these women. Women are the true protectors of traditions and conventions of the family system in India (Taware 235). Elkunchwar has projected very minutely the emotional fluctuations of the female characters in *Old-Stone Mansion*.

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B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English  
DSM College  
Parbhani 431401

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Former Dean, Faculty of Arts  
Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University  
Nanded 431606  
Maharashtra  
India  
[bhagwansjadhav@gmail.com](mailto:bhagwansjadhav@gmail.com)

B B. Rajurkar  
Assistant Professor of English  
Sheshabai Mundhe College of Arts  
Gangakhed 431514  
Maharashtra  
India  
[rajurkar\\_gkd@rediffmail.com](mailto:rajurkar_gkd@rediffmail.com)

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