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## Mahesh Elkunchwar and Wada Culture

Dr. A. S. Kanna

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Courtesy: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/i-write-for-theatre-but-i-am-not-out-to-woo-a-large-audience/1070981/>

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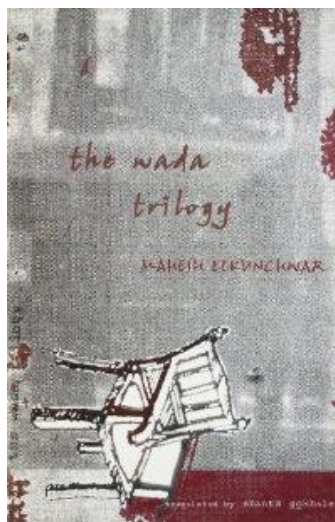
### **Drawn from Personal Experience**

Elkunchwar has always been self-critical. It made him stop writing for eight years after the initial success of plays like *Garbo* and *Vasanakand*, and resume only when convinced that he could replace "shrillness" with substance. Belonging to the generation between playwrights Vijay Tendulkar and Satish Alekar, Elkunchwar has drawn more from personal experience, and from small town culture. His short plays like *Reflection* and *Flower of Blood* strike hard. His best-known work is *The Wada Trilogy* (Seagull, 2004), starting with the classic *Old Stone Mansion*. His recent *Sonata*, a triptych of women, was produced not in Marathi, but in English by Amal Allana.

### **Lived Away from the Centre of Marathi Theatre**

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. Paradoxically Alekar achieves the same by being an "Insider." He has lived in Pune for most part of his life and often directs the plays he writes and also acts in them sometimes. As a writer, his range is phenomenal and the myriad issues taken up by him are awe inspiring to say the least. It helps the cause that his writing is pungent with a wicked subversive brand of humor underlining it.

### **Focus on the Issues of Wada Community**



The text presents the issues of the Wada community in a way to help the reader relate with those issues even when he/she is located in a different culture. Firstly, it is important to know what the term “Wada” means. The term “Wada” refer to the entire culture/tradition of the old, decaying feudal structure of a region in Maharashtra. It is a Marathi word which refers to a group of houses together where people live in joint families and share the *wada*. *Wada Trilogy* comprises three plays in sequential order: *Old Stone Mansion* (Wada cheribandi), *The Pond* (Magna Talyakathi) and *Apocalypse* (Yugant).

### ***Old Stone Mansion***

*Old Stone Mansion* is a product of the large joint family with its hierarchic patriarchy that holds the tensions in check under a facile pretense of the authority. When Elkunchwar wrote, Wada he was going through many problems. He knows how to cope with certain situations, and when he began to look into himself, he began to understand other people.

In an interview, Elkunchwar says:

And Wada in a way is a very personal kind of experience, because I come from such a family, although my family has never fallen on bad days, because my father was a very sensible person, and made sure everyone was educated. . . . But since the Land ceiling Act in 1949, I have seen feudal families crumbling under the pressure. Three years of my life were spent in a place called ‘Wani’ where a lot of rich families lived, all Brahmins, about twenty or twenty five families. It was a place known for its rich people. And I could see their state of decay. I mean those families are still there, and all of them have fallen on bad days. And I could see why it was happening. They had lost the work habit centuries ago - they had never worked in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

### **Rural/Urban, Migration and Disintegration**

The basic issues dealt with in the trilogy are that of rural/urban division, migration and disintegration of the Deshpande family (belonging to the Wada community) and how these social

and cultural metaphors are used and employed by the playwright to comment upon the realities of not just the region, but the entire Indian community as a whole.

### **Chekhov and Elkunchwar**

It is very interesting to find that both playwrights Chekhov and Elkunchwar have their personal elements in their plays. There were several experiences in Chekhov's own life that are said to have directly inspired his writing of *The Cherry Orchard*. When Chekhov was sixteen, his mother went into debt, after having been cheated by some builders she had hired to construct a small house. A former lodger, Gabriel Selivanov, offered to help her financially, but in turn secretly bought the house for himself. At approximately the same time, his childhood home in Taganrog was sold to pay off its mortgage. These financial and domestic upheavals imprinted themselves on his memory greatly and would reappear in the action of *The Cherry Orchard*.

Chekhov also touches on the theme of decadence of society in *The Cherry Orchard*. It focuses on the tensions of changing times. On another level, the play centers on the complications with major changes happening in an entire society: the freedom of the serfs and the decaying power of the aristocracy are two more general aspects of Russian history which affect the play.

### **Surrender to Commercialism or Careerism to Total Disaffiliation**

Elkunchwar had already left behind his obsession with the 'absurdity' of existence, impelled by the inroads of repressed sexuality and secret violence. When Elkunchwar began to write *Old Stone Mansion*, he found himself getting out of himself, looking at the world with sympathy. He watches the process of social collapse which is the fate of aristocratic families.

In *Old Stone Mansion*, he takes a close look at one of those families still struggling against time in some small town or village. The elderly men are lazy drones, the elder women are the patient upholders and preservers of the system, the younger men of the same generation are as subservient as the women in their submission to authority. It is only the new generation that bristles - in several variations of rebellion - ranging from bitter cynicism to escape, to irresponsibility. It is a kind of surrender to commercialism or careerism to total disaffiliation.

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Elkunchwar takes great care to chart out the positions and roles and rules of this great battle that is acted out against a history that drives the Brahmin gentry into bankruptcy.

### **Average Village Family**

It is the family of the average present day village commuter. Its specific identification, however, makes it the archetype of all families at all times. It becomes every family. All images are blended in a composition of universal significance. All the characters fail in their responsibility. There has to be a crisis to revive the loosening ties within the family.

### **Disintegration of Relationships**

One of the several linking devices used by Mahesh Elkunchwar is the disintegration of relationships within the Deshpande family, where in the first part of *The Old Stone Mansion*, the scattered family comes together for the funeral of their father Venkatesh, but ends up fighting over who should get how much share in the family from the 'wada' that has been left behind by the deceased, while no one is ready to spend money on the post-funeral rites.

**Vahini:** But can't everyone share the cost? Wasn't he everybody's father? Or are we alone responsible for keeping up the Deshpande name? (93) \*

The mother or Aai is a witness to all the bickering that goes on in the house about who would take charge of the post-funeral expenses of her husband. A truce is reached when she decides to sell her share of wada to meet the expenses and says: "Do you all think I don't know what is going on? But things were different when he was alive." (124)

She can see the old wada crumbling and with it would collapse an entire network of relationships and an entire culture of living together in a community.

Indian readers can immediately relate to such fights that go on in many families where everyone wants to get out of responsibility and just grab his or share of land and money. One must be able to relate to the disparities of a family deeply rooted in a region and such discrepancies carry a meaning for the reader which is beyond the Wada cultural traditions.

### **Distinct from One Another**

But in *The Cherry Orchard* not only do characters' class and social differences come out, but the way in which they interact in various moments emphasizes both the extreme differences between their personalities and the similarities. Paradoxically, it is these exaggerated distinctions between these characters that create an awareness of some quality that unites them all. The characters in this play are all remarkably distinct from one another on an individual level, but in a greater sense, they are similar because they all possess a tendency towards excess.

### **Grew up in a Wada**

The play's finely drawn character sketches are informed by Elkunchwar's own experiences of growing up in a wada (or mansion) in the village of Parwa. In an interview published in the 2004 edition of *Wada Trilogy*, the playwright says that he always feels like an outsider in this milieu. This distance allows Elkunchwar to write about the Deshpandes with almost scientific precision. The playwright is often strongly critical of the Deshpandes. For instance, Sudhir, often the voice of reason, chastises Bhaskar who, though too poor to pay his grocery bill, decides to feed the entire village as part of their father's death rituals.

### **An Important Play - *Wada Chirebandi***

Even though families like the Deshpandes are on their last legs, *Wada Chirebandi* is an important play, because it deals with the "sense of tradition that is so deeply rooted in the Indian psyche". His version of the play questions 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.

Mahesh Elkunchwar's celebrated play *Wada Chirebandi* reminds one of Ramsha Lokapur's *Taayi Saaheba*. Both, the play and the novel record the decline and disintegration of the huge Wadas, as well as the smothering of Brahmin families that lived in villages in post-Independent India. It also juxtaposes the emotional turmoil of people.

### **Decaying Feudalism and Megapolis Life**

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The distance between Vidharbha village, where the play takes place and Bombay where the films are made, shows the distance between decaying feudalism and the megalopolis. The part of the family that has settled in Bombay lives a hard life, a typical lower middle class life in a cramped two room flat, and yet in the village they represent prosperity. They are at pains all the time to bring disillusion. Elkunchwar portrays the characters of Sudhir and Anjali who live in Bombay under spiritual traumas. This is typical of every village in India. They hide themselves in hypocrisy in towns and cities. But, when they come to villages, they want to be recognized as the rich people, though they have nothing to eat.

### **Not Simply a Family Drama –Social Reality**

Mahesh Elkunchwar deals with the issue of family crisis – a crisis of traditional culture against commercial or consumer culture. He says, “Wada is not a simple family drama, it is more than that, a document of social change, political change.” 2

The play deals with the disintegration of traditional joint family, and village life, under the onslaught of the modern force of urbanization. Wada shows the deterioration of the typical aristocratic family of Deshpande, in a span of thirty years. The play, on the one hand, presents women as victims of the caste bias and patriarchal mindset, but on the other hand, also presents them as agents of change.

### **Prabha’s Role**

Prabha, the sister of the three brothers – Bhasker, Sudhir and Chandu, is a case where the woman is made out to be a senseless and useless impediment in the traditional family. She is not allowed to go to college, though she is an extremely intelligent girl. She is prepared to continue her education even at the age of thirty-five, but she is denied any opportunity of education and work outside the family. She couldn’t even cross the threshold of the house, because of the false ideas of prestige of the Brahmin aristocratic family. Prabha burns with a desire to complete her B.A. and to find a job in the society. Her father never allows any other opinion about her education, but his own, to prevail. “Education is no use to a girl.” (125) - that is his refrain. Prabha comes to a conclusion that a woman can’t be herself in this male dominated society, because everywhere the laws are drafted by men. While discussing with Sudhir matters about

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her father's death, she comes to a conclusion that when a father dies, the daughter has no future. She believes that a girl, after the death of her father, has to survive on whatever little one might throw at her in charity.

Prabha wants to stay in Bombay with her mother, Aai. When she points it out, Anjali seems to be absolutely indifferent to her brother Sudhir. Anjali becomes alert and talks about the life they lead in Bombay.

**Prabha:** This time I'll go with you to Bombay.

**Anjali:** Won't Aai need someone here with her?

**Prabha:** Let's take her along too. It would be a good change for her. Didn't you see? Vahini waited for Aai to take her money. If she stays here alone, they'll eat her alive.

**Anjali:** Speak to your brother. It's not for me to say. Whatever he decides...

**Prabha:** You're quite under my brother's thumb, aren't you!

**Anjali:** You know his temper. He's Deshpande through and through.... But let me tell you, only we know how to manage. Pull the sheet over your head and your feet are naked. Cover your feet and the head's naked. First it was a battle to find a two-room flat, now it's a battle to pay off the loan.

**Prabha:** Don't give me that sob story of your poverty, please. Nobody is going to visit you, all right? You are a proper Konkanastha, aren't you? (94)

It is not even five days since Tatyaji is gone. Five days. In these five days, Vahini has changed. There was no delay in the house keys reaching her waistband. And no delay before Aai was shoved into the darkness of the backroom. When Tatyaji was alive, one couldn't hear Vahini's steps in the veranda, ever. Within five days you hear her commands outside the mansion. (87)

### **The Question of Prabha's Education**

In Act II Prabha raises the topic of her education in the presence of all the members of the family. After the death of her father she wants to continue her education, because it was her father who didn't like her to study. They believe, it is beneath their prestige and honour for a

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Deshpande girl to stay in hostel alone. Sudhir too was studying then, and it was too difficult for them to pay for two. Nobody knows for what the girl is crying for and shouting. She never walks out to a factory. If she tries to find job, the pressure of social prestige is so heavy, that she can't cope with it. She was not rebellious enough when her father was alive.

### **Feels Liberated, But Hopes were Shattered**

After the death of the patriarch Tatyaji, Prabha feels liberated. She has hopes to be self-reliant. She wants to sell off her share of gold. She says to her mother, "I will put the money in the bank, Aai. That gold should fetch fifty to sixty thousand rupees. I will be able to manage my studies from the interest on the amount." (127)

But this hope is wasted as Ranju runs away with the gold. In other words whatever may be the conscious will of the women in the play, their lives are doomed. There are no escape routes. No one questions, or rebels with any success. Everything is bleak. There is no hope.

### **Choosing to Live Her Life**

Now Prabha feels strong enough to live her life. So she doesn't agree to the selling off of the portion at the back of the house. She blames her two brothers for their irresponsibility towards the family and her education.

**Prabha:** My dear able-bodied brothers! Why don't you wear bangles? Selling the morsel from your mother's mouth! And these two women, pretending as if they don't know what's going on! (116)

### **Women of the Play and Tradition and Modernity**

The women of the play make great philosophical leaps and reinstate their inner sanctity of justice and kindness. Among them, the mother and daughter Prabha strike the audience most. Having lived and seen it all, the pious mother doesn't see Prabha's dreams of getting out of the Wada and pursuing her education as threatening to tradition. In fact, she expresses great faith in her aspiration of self-realization. Tradition and modernity are then not two different entities, but a complex overlap of notions that are ostensibly contradictory.

Contrary to the Deshpande story, Anya in *The Cherry Orchard* leads her crying mother off the stage, promising her a new orchard, which symbolizes a new life.

### **Victims**

Mahesh Elkunchwar's women characters in *The Wada Trilogy* are quite interesting. They are victims. The recently widowed Aai is gradually, but definitely filling up the space which has been vacated by Dadi. She is incapacitated, and the only business she has, is calling out the name of her dead son, and asking for the time. Aai is devoted, she suffers, but she has misgivings about the portion at the back of the house. She asks "Bhaskar.... Sell off the portion at the back." (119)

This is epitomized in her sacrificing her share of the property for the final rites of her husband. Since she is a widow, she hands over her reign to her eldest daughter-in-law. "My term is over. Now it's the reign of your sister-in-law. Keep that in mind." (124)

This is how she sets an ideal quite chaste, and lives in accordance with the customs, rules and traditions of a feudal Brahmin once. Aai is unable to influence the crucial decisions like educating her daughter Prabha. She confesses to her,

Prabha, we really ruined your life, dear. You were the cleverest of all the children. And you loved your studies. But that was his nature. Nobody could act against his word. For him it was just one thing - why do girls need education? He never allowed any opinion but his own to prevail. Education is of no use to a girl, that was his refrain. (125)

Now, Aai is concerned about Prabha's unmarried status, which would make Prabha dependent on her brother and sister-in-law.

### **Crumbling Values and Daring Effort of Vahini**

Aai's tragedy is the misfortune of crumbling values of feudal orders and patriarchy. In fact that is what the playwright is trying to imply in the play. No one wants to fight against the system. Everyone wants to hold on to past memories, get nostalgic and yearn for the glorious

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days. No one advocates even the most basic of changes, like economic change, which can bring about freedom and liberation from extremely regressive values. Woman keeps in tune with the man only in the villages. There she thinks and feels like a man and enters the evolutionary struggle for progress as fervently as he does in a family.

It is obviously seen in Vahini's character. Vahini is a quite firm and very gentle person in the play. She represents an average Indian woman-wife, mother and daughter-in-law.

Similarly, in *The Cherry Orchard*, Ranevskaya's failure to address problems facing her estate and family mean that she eventually loses almost everything and her fate can be seen as a criticism of those people who are unwilling to adapt to the new Russia. Her petulant refusal to accept the truth of her past, in both life and love, is her downfall throughout the play. She ultimately runs between her life in Paris and in Russia. She is a woman who lives in an illusion of the past.

### **Growing Belief in Outward Show**

Shanta Gokhale, the translator makes comments on how the whole family believes in outward show and pomposity. She also brings to light the typical Indian sensibility where families are more bothered about their reputation in society, no matter how hard they try to make ends meet. Scene II of *Old Stone Mansion* brings this kind of hypocrisy very clearly when Vahini says: "The Deshpandes decided to be modern and put a tractor there. Forget about usefulness as long as we can make a show of wealth." (89)

Vahini becomes the mistress of the family after the death of Tatyaji in the house. It is not even five days since Tatyaji is gone, and she changes a lot. There is no delay in the house keys reaching her waistband. When Tatyaji was alive one couldn't hear Vahini's steps in the Veranda, but within five days one can hear her commands even from outside the house. When they discuss buying of groceries, she meticulously points out to ask for the equal share of the expenses which is required for the funeral rites of her father-in-law. Vahini blindly justifies the actions of her son and daughter, though her son is a stupid drunkard: "It did happen once or twice. But then immediately all the relatives were ready to eat him alive. Bhavji, he is like Abhay to you."

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Ranju grows genuinely fond of films, and at the same time she realizes the fact that she can do nothing. but spend all her time at the mirror. It is a kind of reckless passion for a teenage girl to become an actress. Ranju belongs to a different world, and it is the world which she shares with her tuition master. Her dreams of the world are fantastic embodiment of whatever is excluded for her, by the family. It may be said that the white heat of sexual desire melts her will power, and she has nothing to do with the community life in the village.

Prabha is an educated and mentally developed young woman. She understands the teacher's attitude towards Ranju. She sends him back whenever he comes to teach her, even as Vahini is reluctant to send him back because Ranju has already failed twice in her X class. On the other hand, Prabha alerts her saying Ranju is already seventeen years old. Prabha, finally, finds that Ranju is not interested in her studies. She says to Vahini

You will regret it. I tell you all this because as 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. (97)

But Vahini's reaction is,

I am also telling you, wance,(sister-in-law) do not go on and on about Ranju . . . I can only say that it is not good to be so suspicious about any one. (97)

### **Holding on to Past Memories**

Everyone in the play wants to hold on to past memories. No one advocates change. No one advocates even the most basic changes like economic change, which can bring about freedom and liberation from extremely regressive values. The only person who tries to escape from this reality is Ranju. But, alas, even she is bought, reclaimed, with gold.

### **Chandu, a Tragic Figure**

Chandu is another tragic figure in the play. He is obviously weak, sensitive, vulnerable and affectionate. But he is not strong enough to say "no" to any kind of injustice. All day he toils like a servant in the house. He goes to receive the Bombay couple in the beginning of the

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play and waits there till late night. But at last, he comes back without them as the bus is cancelled. When there is a collective responsibility to perform the rites of his father, he cannot force his brothers for money. He has been fasting since his father passed away, yet he doesn't look for food. While getting groceries into the house he cuts himself on the tin of the tractor which stands for their family's prestige and honour in front of the house.

Chandu leads a life of subservience in the house, since he is not the eldest son. Only Bhaskar, the eldest son and Sudhir who has left the house and settled in Bombay, seem to enjoy more prestige. But the real strength of the play doesn't lie in the way the family and the traditional values collapse in the changing times. It lies in the very sensitive perception into the inner lives of the women in the joint family. The lively discussion between Chandu and Ranju indicates his loving nature. He is unable to command even the children in the house. He is an affectionate person in the family and looks after Dadi. When his mother, Aai suggests he sell off her portion, he reacts spontaneously and asks his brothers to mortgage his land.

In a letter to the audience, Mahesh Elkunchwar suggests that on second thoughts he would 'personally like to delete' Chandu's telling Aai that he would have liked to have had a shop of his own. As Elkunchwar now feels that Chandu is a mute sufferer, it would be better if he has the slightest courage to speak out his dreams. Thus his last cry "Sudhir!" (141) becomes more poignant at the end of the play.

### **Elkunchwar's Intent**

Time is the facilitator of the encounter between obsession and falling off in the play. At one level there is the conflict between the tractor and the palanquin. At another level the very presence of the grandmother who remains blissfully unaware of the death of her son, Venkatesh. In an interview Elkunchwar talks about the presence of Dadi, "Dadi is Time and also the silent spectator who sees Time flit by in front of her eyes." 16

Elkunchwar presents two distinctive generations in the play. Dadi, Aai of the old generation, Vahini and Anjali of the middle generation, and Ranju as the representative of the modern generation all belong to this family. But the theme of identity, and the subversion of the

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expectations of such a theme, is one that can be seen even in *The Cherry Orchard*; indeed, the cast itself can be divided up into three distinct parts: the Gayev family (Ranevskaya, Gayev, Anya and Varya), family friends (Lopakhin, Pishchik and Trofimov), and the "servant class" (Firs, Yasha, Dunyasha, Charlotta and Yepikhodov).

### **Inability to Respect and Understand the Rights of Others**

India is a good example of people's inability to respect and understand the rights of the others. Both Prabha and Chandu are tragic characters. Elkunchwar highlights the character of Prabha in the play. This may be a true depiction of the situation, but the playwright has not gone beyond. Instead, women in an age are prescribed. It appears these women have no alternative even in these changing times. And so, those who try to break away from moulds of tradition are punished or brought back.

Trapped in tradition and the hangover of a glorious past, there are hardly any routes to liberation for these people. The exacting demands of the community don't make it any simpler for them. The multi-layered play has the invisible presence of the tractor throughout. This image of the ruthless wheels of technology weaves in the complicated intervention of modernity. The bedridden Dadi, who keeps asking what time it is every half hour, becomes time herself. She is the passive observer who is a spectator to things taking their course. The desires, greed, pettiness of the family members, their aspirations and dreams – the play brings it out subtly and beautifully. Redemption and realization for each one of them comes from within the suffering and not in some idyllic pastoral plains, under the dreamy Bodhi Vruksha.

### **Simplistic Representation**

The story brings up several issues – migration, caste, girl child, hypocrisies of urban life, – but fails to make an impact. Even in terms of its representation of people, it is rather simplistic. What finally emerges is the success story of two generations of women, Prabha as well as her mother, who move on despite odds.

Elkunchwar shows Aai as a woman with a modernized outlook. Her character signifies the continuity, as she may be very traditional and brought up in a traditional fashion, but she is the more modern than the most modern woman in the play. It is really something great when she is prepared to sell away the property so as to keep her husband's prestige alive. In the position that Aai takes to bring the dispute to a close, she is motivated above all by a sense of propriety. She doesn't even bother when Prabha proposes to continue her studies and lead an independent life in the city. It absolutely gives an indication that in spite of all the changes around the world, the basic tenets of traditionalism are always part of the society. One needn't give it up to become totally modern and non-conformist. In spite of all the changes around the world, Aai's character signifies and stands as a hallmark for tradition; this doesn't mean that she can't be modern, but tradition which takes into account the basic tenets of human values can always be adaptable for modernism. Her character reminds us of *The Cherry Orchard*, when Madame Ranevsky and Gayef, cutting the cherry orchard down is not an option; the estate is too important. Their inability to comprehend the sense of Lopakhin's lucrative suggestion implies that they are two characters of the old aristocracy who cannot change with the changing times. The play concerns an aristocratic Russian woman and her family as they return to the family's estate just before it is auctioned to pay the mortgage. While presented with options to save the estate, the family essentially does nothing and the play ends with the estate being sold to the son of a former serf, and the family leaving to the sound of the cherry orchard being cut down. The story presents themes of cultural futility — both the futility of the aristocracy to maintain its status and the futility of the bourgeoisie to find meaning in its newfound materialism.

As far as Ranju character is concerned, she sets herself apart from the culture of the wada. The contrast between Prabha and Chandu, both made and controlled by the wada, are touched upon once again. There is a touch of pathos - unresolved mystery- in Chandu calling out for Sudhir at the end in a feeble and broken voice. It can be concluded that the drama is more in Sudhir's response than in Chandu's unvoiced appeal. There is a mix of guilt and discretion in his response when he stops for a moment and moves away.

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Dr. A. S. Kanna  
Lecturer in English  
Silver Jubilee Govt College(Autonomous)  
B-Camp  
Kurnool – 518002  
Andhra Pradesh  
India  
[askanna02@gmail.com](mailto:askanna02@gmail.com)