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TRAJECTORY OF IDENTITY: IMPLICATIONS OF TIME AND SPACE IN MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR'S APOCALYPSE

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ABSTRACT

Drama is a composite art, a mixture of literature and many other arts. It is both the written text as well as the text for performance on the stage. Indian drama gained prominence in the development of Natyashastra and flourished with the emergence of regional theatres. Marathi theatre started its journey in the nineteenth century, but it got popularity in the 1950s and 1960s. Among several forms of play genre, the serious drama by Vijay Tendulkar, P. L. Deshpande, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Satish Alekar influenced theatre throughout India. Mahesh Elkunchwar, along with Vijay Tendulkar and Satish Alekar, forms the Trinity of Marathi literature in English. Elkunchwar has enriched the repertoire of Indian drama with his more than fifteen plays which have been translated into many Indian languages, English, German and French. He wrote many theoretical as well as critical works. Besides, he has been active in India's Parallel Cinema as an actor and a screenwriter. His plays talk about the problems of human existence in the contemporary society. This research deals with the themes of an identity crisis, roles of time and space, the loneliness of a modern man, degeneration of human feelings or of a soul which are present in the play *Apocalypse*. This paper also presents the aspects of rootedness of the characters and the existential angst they pass through. Besides, this paper will also cover the aspects of communication gap, alienation, futility and meaninglessness of human existence in Elkunchwar's *Apocalypse*.

INTRODUCTION:

"An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person." --- Burke & Stets, 03

Mahesh Elkunchwar is one of the important playwrights of Marathi Literature and also of Indian literature. He has authored more than fifteen plays which have been translated into more than one Indian languages as well as Western languages such as English, German and French. His play *Apocalypse* is a 1992 English translation of Marathi play *Yugant* which is the third and the last part of the collections *The Wada Trilogy*. The other two parts of this trilogy are *Old Stone Mansion* (Wada Chirebandi) and *The Pond*. This trilogy deals with the destruction of the Dharangaon village. The plays collected in this trilogy had a successful run and have been taken into consideration as the canonical texts of Marathi literature. The trilogy concerns itself with the sense of tradition and of the human existence in the contemporary society. It also raises a question about familial or social identity as viewed by both the insider and the outsider. Through these plays, from *Old Stone Mansion* to *The Pond* and *Apocalypse*, there is seen the ups and downs of the standard of human existence and the way the Deshpande of the Dharangaon village live their lives in a dilemma of knowing their roots.

Apocalypse is the third part of the Wada Trilogy. The first *Old Stone Mansion* highlights the disintegration of a Brahmin family. It also talks about one family which keeps struggling against the destruction caused by the toll of time. This play shows how the female characters preserve the traditional system and survive against the havoc of time and space. The second, *The Pond*, delineates the post – Wada culture which was once nourished by human existence. The third and last of this trilogy, *Apocalypse*, depicts the several phases of identity a character pass through and survives the struggle of finding the root of his or her existence. It also deals with the themes of timelessness, rootedness versus rootlessness, the quest for inner identity in the contemporary society. In this play, Elkunchwar has given his emotion a new stream wherein the characters speak what they want to speak. In an interview taken by The Hindu newspaper, he says, "In "Apocalypse" I forgot the craft elements, my characters say what they want in three monologues linked by dialogues. It boils down to this, those who cannot share my emotional world reject it; those who can accept it."

Elkunchwar has given a distinct place for *Apocalypse* (*Yugant*) which is written in 1992 and published in the collection of *The Wada Trilogy*. It is a one-act play consisting of four scenes. This play

sketches the identities of four characters and the way how their identities evolve and revolve from time to time. Their identities change and develop in a curved path. The individuals of the play search for the meaning of their lives. They are in a quest for knowing the value of their existence in the contemporary society. Wesley Barnes comments:

"Existentialism, then, is the consciousness of man that he is existing in terms of his own flowing of experience, a flow which he can know, feel, and sense only within himself." (9)

When a character could not know the meaning of life, s/he feels exhausted while connecting with the society. But that person also faces the inescapability of the reality of life. Yet s/he sees uselessness in everything. There is only one place where exists the notion of certitude. Beyond this, s/he does not find any certainty in life. The absurdity fills his or her mind and soul. The Oxford Companion to English Literature defines the term absurdism:

"To define the world as absurd is to recognize its fundamentally mysterious and indecipherable nature, and this recognition is frequently associated with feelings of loss, purposelessness, and bewilderment." (3)

The title of the play *Apocalypse* itself refers to the end of an age. It is about the destruction of the post-colonial Wada culture in Dharangaon village. As the play begins, the notion of timelessness comes forward which signifies the uncertainty of the present condition of the human beings which takes a U-turn for conveying the absurdity of human existence. "Today, tomorrow, or any other time in future" (257) The play is set in a summer season which is depicted as the microcosm of "burning heat" of the seasonal cycle. Abhay visits Dharangaon village to meet Nandini and Parag. Nandini is exhausted by the heat and dust. Nandini has not recognized Abhay at the first sight. She takes some time to revives her memory of Abhay's identity. This slight delay means as time has changed a lot which takes time from Nandini while recognizing Abhay. They are so much confused about the identity of each other. They are "Totally confused, they stare at each other." (257)

Timelessness and the certitude of destiny have cast a great influence upon the characters of Elkunchwar's *Apocalypse*. Abhay feels very thirsty as the summer has been breathing the blistering heat for a long time. Nandini serves him water. Later Abhay makes an inquiry about Parag and Nandini's son Bal and is answered that he is "inside" which is protected from the havoc of time. The characters fail to realize the seasonal cycle of the universe. Everything seems filtered through the apocalyptic space of the universe within a timeless clock which unleash the harness of the

absurdity of human existence. There has been no rain for years. Everything is supposed to turn into lifeless objects, whether it is human sense or any other living things. This is clear from the following dialogues:

Abhay: What sort of heat is this? Aren't we in the middle of the rainy season?

Nandini: It hasn't rained in years. (258)

The open space has turned into an "Inferno" due to drought caused by water crises. The Dharangaon village has not seen rain for years. It has now become a desert. Abhay describes circumstance he experiences on the way to Parag's house and he says that it was a "blazing sky like a furnace". There found no human being or any animal except one or two skeletons. There float some terrible, gruesome images like "smearing heat", "patches of blood", "dogs attacking cops", "clusters of skeletons". These images project a devastated space like an Eliot's "wasteland" existed in the womb of the earth. Despite having seen these images prevalent in the society Nandini remains positive from within. The utter hopeless milieu around never ever shatters her faith of living in such an apocalyptic society. Her patience shows light to the other characters of the play through the following dialogues:

Abhay: How do you manage?

Nandini: Things work out, somehow. (Pause. Abhay gives her a sharp look.) (261)

This "Inferno" can't produce any hope or anything good for the dwellers of it. It is just hellish which makes its dwellers feel hopeless and exhausted. We can't expect anything good from such a place. Abhay says, "What else can we expect in this inferno!" (258) This inferno engenders absurdity which affects the lives of its dwellers and henceforth, the human existence faces ambience in the contemporary society.

Apocalypse is replete with the examples of the rootedness of the characters. It is generally accepted that a person feels rooted wherever s/he stays. But rootedness does not last for a long time. It is because s/he is to leave that place for another place and s/he can not strike any roots anywhere else except his or her own soil. S/he always feels a heart – linked connection with his or her pure roots. Time surrenders in influencing the characters' feeling of nostalgia. Ironically, this happens with Abhay at one moment when he is asked by Nandini about his coming to the village:

Nandini: What made you come, Bhauji?

Abhay: Couldn't stop myself. Had to come. Couldn't get the house out of my head after I heard of Aji's death. (258)

There are mentions of some people who have left the village which has turned into a space of destitute. They could not find the solace of living in a desolate village and they have also not got the space to find the meaning of their lives in an apocalyptic society. Abhay now lives in Sweden who, earlier, lived in the UK. He has changed his house so many times in the last few years. He is the only character in this play who belongs to an uncertain destiny. He does not acquire stability of his existence. He goes through the ups and downs for spiritual and physical identity and roots. But, ironically, his existence or personal identity has been affected by the time and this has been causing the block to open access to space. Abhay tells:

"We've changed houses so often in the last few years... We'd have changed our house and town yet again." (259)

The theme of timelessness gives both the literal and rhetorical meaning. On one hand, it means that everything, affected by the cruelty of time, is absurd or something futile which do not give any hope to live or let live. On the other hand, this timelessness engenders a new hope in Nandini's mind when she says, "But the moon still shines over it." (259). This universal truth generates an

impetus to live in this absurd and apocalyptic society. She cherishes a positive attitude against the nihilistic society. She does not change her inner identity at any cost. On the other side, Abhay takes him as an "Outsider". He could not find the root of identity anywhere outside of his homeland. Nandini remarks, "No outsider has come this way in the last five years. You're the first." (260)

Apocalypse presents the lives of the characters in such a way their identity seems confined to the microcosm of their own world. They feel that their world is the only world existed on the earth. The endless space of the universe gets winded up in an individual's visionary world. The playwright has presented the apocalyptic world in the following dialogues:

Abhay: How do you keep in touch with the outside world?

Nandini: We've forgotten that there is a world outside full of people. (260)

Nandini's speech can be interpreted in several ways. But the reason behind such a remark is something different. Communication between Parag and Nandini's world and the outside world is maintained by the former world's dwellers' forgetfulness. Abhay wonders about Nandini's world and feels worried about whether there exists any communication between the two worlds. Nandini's positive attitude remains untattered.

While talking about the rootedness or the feeling of nostalgia, Elkunchwar has incorporated those feelings in both the rooted Nandini and Parag and the displaced Abhay. Though, once in earlier, Abhay was trying to invoke Nandini and Parag to leave the village. But now he himself feels how much he is rooted to his birthplace. He very much feels the nostalgia for roots. He now realizes that he has chased after false existence which has given him nothing but the feeling of rootlessness. He could not strike any roots in anywhere else after leaving his own soil. He comments, "Also, once you've left your soil, you can't strike roots anywhere else." (260) Parag is deeply rooted in his land. The younger generation of Parag's son Bal is also given the sense of rootedness to the land. In response to Abhay's question, Nandini replies, "Your cousin won't leave this place. Which means I won't. Which means Bal won't." (261) Their familial identity with the homeland remains tied even in the time of destruction and degeneration. Abhay wants to take Bal away from the drought-affected, devastated village provided that Bal can get his space to live a healthy life.

Elkunchwar has emphasized upon the identity crisis the characters feel throughout the play *Apocalypse*. Chandukaka has transformed into a "mere skeleton." His identity is not being recognized by the other characters in the play. Time has exerted its toll very badly upon Chandukaka's life. There are two schemes of times in the play – the one is civilizational time and the other is chronological time. Between these two schemes of time, the Dharangaon village has turned into a desert and the Wada culture has turned into dust and darkness has covered the whole space. Parag says, "There isn't a shop left in the village" (262) The identity of Chandukaka is blistered by the havoc of time. Parag finds him "on Dahaswamedha Ghat sitting in a row of beggars." (263) Not only the body of Chandukaka is affected by the death toll of time but also "the man's mind is in tatters." (263)

Philosophically, human existence is always given priority. This means that one who maintains subjectivity in experiencing the world is more superior to the person whose experiences of essences are abstract. Human existence needs space which is taken to be ended timelessly or will be bound by certitude. This existence differs from the physical world as is seen in the character of Parag and Nandini. The physical world is devastated by the drought but Parag and Nandini stay unaffected because human beings are free to make for themselves the kind of world they want to live in. This freedom gives them some responsibilities which do not exist in a void space, rather in recognizing someone's identity in the physical world.

In *Apocalypse*, Mahesh Elkunchwar has asserted the notion that everyone has his or her own idea about everything, whether it is of Superman or anything else. His or her views depends upon a freed view of life which is enabled by the capacity of his or her mind. This notion provides one the right track for searching for one's identity in this universe. Abhay makes it clear that the human beings are very much insignificant people full of greed, violence, or treachery. Abhay says, "We are insignificant people filled with greed, violence, malice, treachery." (264) He, later on, raises a big concept of death which is the only truth. "Death is the only truth." (264) He goes further by saying that we make a great mistake interfering with the Great Chain of Being. We mistake us for the Lords of the creations. We wish to capture the whole power of the world in our hand.

"When you realize this, you begin to wonder, aren't we making a huge mistake interfering with the order of things? We consider ourselves lords of creations! The whole universe belongs to me...it must revolve around me! I will turn it upside down if I wish, to change its laws as I like. Not change. Break. Because we're apart from Nature, superior to it." (264)

Greed gets us stripped of moral consciousness. We try to defy the spiritual laws of creations. We become so obsessed with hoarding power that we forget our own identity, our existence in the world. We also forget the horizon of the space immortality of time.

Abhay becomes hopeless about his own life. He finds uselessness in pursuing knowledge. He is in search of an inner identity. He now realizes the value of his prime life which becomes clear when he says, in despair, "I have laid waste the prime of my life." (264) He now can understand the meaning of his life and feel the connection with his homeland. He has shifted his house in several places but could not find the satisfaction of life. He now wishes to have a home wherein he can get satisfaction before he dies. The rootedness Elkunchwar's characters are marked with great feasibility in Abhay's inner thought. He speaks out to the readers and the audience that he never became able to find a root in the alien soil. This rootedness helps Abhay and other characters identify with the soil of his own land. Abhay says,

"That's why I've dragged myself all the way here for the satisfaction of finding a home before died. (Pause) I pulled out my roots once and left but could never strike them in that alien soil." (265)

At one point, Abhay feels rootless too and alienated as well. When Parag reminds him of his arrogance and negligence in giving Kaku respect, Abhay says, "My home! My parents never gave me a home." (265) Elkunchwar later explains why Abhay says like this. It is because he is actually not feeling rootless, rather he repents upon it as, in his opinion, he could not get rest for a moment in that home. He never thought that home as his own.

Geographical factors play an important role in differentiating the level of weather on the basis of time and space. Consequently, the nature of people differs from one place to another place. Ironically, Abhay thinks that "it would cool off at night." (266) at Dharangaon village where there have been no rains for years. In response, Parag says, "We've forgotten what coolness is." Abhay has the feeling of Sweden as he has been living there now. It is cold here in Sweden. whatever the condition of the weather is in anywhere, the person who is resolute in his identity and rooted to his or her homeland never gets shattered by any hazards of time and space. Parag asserts, "Our days are bearable, Abhay! I have no complaints." (p. 266) He informs Abhay that he is always ready to spend his life under the open sky. The open space gives him the freedom to live freely. He never feels suffocated within the four walls of the devastated space. He says, "It feels good to be free. Now it's just us, the sky up there, and the stars." (p. 266) Here Elkunchwar has tried to sketch out the inner feelings of Parag and has also shown how much he is open for the human existence. On the other hand, the same stars look like hot coals to Abhay.

Materialism is one of the important aspects dealt with in *Apocalypse*. People run after material objects and forget their actual goal in life. When a person feels moral instinct in his or her

heart, s/he gets the impetus to be identified with the world outside. Parag feels an unseen connection with his roots and also with the people who are not aware of the spiritual or moral sense. In Parag's view, "Life should strip everybody down to nothing at least once." (268) Such thinking behind this is morally inspired. People become so obsessed with the materialistic world that they forget their roots, their ancestry. He openly declares that he can never tear himself from the village. This rootedness is universalized in his speech when he says, "I can't tear myself away from this village." (268). He himself does not know why he is so rooted in this village. It is because he has sacrificed himself for "A faceless, wretched, Impoverished village..." (268)

How much a person is capable to identify himself or herself with the realities of life depends upon how much s/he is true to himself or herself. Nature has her own regular eternal cycle. The natural elements follow the cycle of Nature. Unlike Nature, human beings are given choice to choose between two binary things. Parag tells Abhay that "everybody has to make a choice between facing life and escaping from it." (270) A person who is true to himself or herself and ready to adapt to the adversary of life dares to face life. His or her identity becomes universal for the rest of the world. And the person who is nihilistic in approach always in an attempt to escape from the hard reality of life. Consequently, that person is destined to lose his or her identity from the rational, meaningful world. Abhay always feels like "an outsider everywhere." (271)

Apocalypse exhibits the gruesome picture of the loneliness of the modern man. The "modern" man is obsessed with the mundane life so much that when that person gets disillusioned, he finds himself alone without any home to claim as his own. When Chandu was at home, he was happy, certain that the pond existed. He was now in search for home and when he found the pond, it was already dried up which left Chandu shattered. He now feels lonely. He could not find his own identity in the pond. His loneliness is given a flame of desire to go back to his old "memory". He speaks out his inner thought in monologues:

"The earth rejected me, the four quarters turned hostile. Even the vast, infinite sky could not hold my loneliness... My life was over. Finished. I had wasted it, running after that mirage." (277)

Elkunchwar has depicted the lives of the characters very vividly in the play *Apocalypse*. The play has three unities of – time, place, and action. The duration of the play is exactly hours. The twenty-four hours duration seems an age to Parag when he tells Abhay, "You came yesterday. But an age seems to have passed in these twenty-four hours." (278) In the age of timelessness, the moments of a day seem passed without having given a look at the flow of life. The setting remains the same Mansion throughout the play. Though there does not happen the expansion of the place, the characters grow up spiritually. There is a number of silences and pauses which give the characters "time" to reflect upon their life.

One's identity turns in circle and finally rejuvenates the lost self when an age ends itself. Time binds us in its thread for a while. But when it loosens its clutches, we become prey to the turbine of destiny. Elkunchwar has very tactfully elucidated the curved path of identity the characters pass throughout their lives. They are not kept under privilege of space. That is why, they take turns towards wherever they wish. Bal is the only character in the play *Apocalypse* who remains "insider" and unaffected from the apocalyptic society throughout the play. *Apocalypse* takes us into the world where the identity of one's self is dignified with spirituality.

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