

A CRITICAL STUDY OF MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR'S PSYCHE AS A PROTAGONIST OF THE PLAY REFLECTION: MAN IN SEARCH OF HIMSELF

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Abstract:

In the modern world man accustoms himself to a machine-like life. He wants to earn a lot – money, good name in the society, popular among all and so on. For this reason, he/she does anything to earn laurels. One can find a few numbers of people live a casual and realistic life. They understand and accept the stark reality of life and makeup themselves to the life situations. On the other hand, rest of them run after the life's last end to make themselves known to all. (Record breakers can be included in this group). In this translated play Reflection, the author has portrayed the dilemma of the protagonist who lost his reflection on the mirror one fine morning and how the loss affected him and how he came out of it. He used a new dramatic technique called Entering One's Mind to describe the protagonist's psyche.

Key words: Optimism, Pessimism, Trivialities, Reflection, Broomstick, Flags, Entering One's mind, Work Shirkers, Suicide, Communism, Blockhead, Absurdity

In this notable play, 'He' is the protagonist, who lost his reflection in the mirror, worries a lot about his loss at the outset. Later, he understands the situation and accepts the loss and feels himself ideal and unique. He cares for nothing. He skips to shave his beard and not to go to his office because no one can identify him due to his loss of reflection. When he speaks with Flags, he is very cool on the comments of the latter. Flags calls him by name like 'work

shirkers' and so on, 'He' cares nothing. When a woman, who is working in his office, proposes her love towards him, He laughs at her. He questions her a lot. How and when did she fall in love with him? Even though she tries to woo him, He simply retorts her and pacifies her. At one time, she leaves him without any notice in the dark. In the end, He commits suicide by jumping out of his house's window from the fifth floor.

Woman, in this play, is the land lady of the flat in the fifth floor. She is a widower. The protagonist 'He' has been living in her flat for three years. As a landlady, she wants to control over him. She lays him new rules then and there to follow. From the beginning, she starts scolding the protagonist who is irregular to start to his office. She prepares coffee for him and sweeps his room every day. On that day, she scolds him as usual not seeing his face. When she comes to know that He has lost his reflection in the mirror, she wonders at him and wants to convey to everyone. When He pleads her not to disclose it, she is upset. Then, she pacifies him, makes up his mind to lead a different life. She proves herself dominant during her interaction with his mind. When the third character Flags comes, she acts simply as a cook. When the fourth character Broomstick tries to woo the hero, she warns him not to accept the latter's proposal.

She may be afraid of losing her housemate, so she tries her level best to keep him under her control. She tells him, if he unites with Broomstick, he may lose his unique feature of man with no reflection.

Flags, an acquaintance of woman, make his entry in the middle of the play. He is a flamboyant, one who blows his own trumpet, who works for the welfare of labourers. He makes fun of the hero because the latter has lost his reflection.

He does apple polishing to have breakfast at woman's house. At one time, he was victimized by both the hero and the woman. They start making fun of him. Flags shows off himself as a incarnation of Karl Marx and speaks for the welfare of labourers, 'He' mocks his tone and makes him stupid. At one point, Flags loses his temper and scolds him. 'He' is so cool and asks to enter his mind. Flags enters He's mind and proves himself weak. When he is asked to look at the mirror, he looks like a cock represented in the play *Mithu Mithu Popat* by Dilip Chitre. At last, Flags cannot bear their comments, gets insulted and leaves the house.

Broomstick is a young lady who is working with the hero in government office. She visits woman's house with determination. She sings a song, when she starts at the doorsteps. She introduces herself to the hero that she is his colleague sitting in the same room where the hero works. She praises him a 'lord of my heart' with some intention. The hero 'He' cannot be able to identify her. She is shocked to hear that he could not recognize her. She proposes her love to him. She tells him why she has fallen in love with him – that she too has lost her reflection. She tries her level best to woo him. She gets into his mind to show how sincerely she loves him. She is bored by the story told by him and leaves him without notice.

The remarkable thing in the play is the author names his characters in a different way. There are four major characters in the play namely the protagonist Blockhead, the communist friend of the land lady called Flags and the hero's colleague called Broomstick. Their names convey what sort of people they are. The name Flags represents the character who is a flag bearer of communism. Nowadays, this ideology is becoming outdated in Indian context. But, Flags is stick on to his concept of Equality. He is very clever in talking, like parrot, about communism, but he is actually self-centred and a leech. He sharply comes to Woman's house for breakfast.

Broomstick, the fourth character, a colleague of He, loves him. The name denotes the wagon of witches. She represents herself as exploiter of He. She tries a lot to take him under her control, but she fails in all her attempts.

The hero is not so intelligible (i) to understand what his dilemma is, (ii) whether to worry about it or not, (iii) to realize the reality by his loss of reflection, and (iv) whether his neighbours really help him to solve his problem or they try to exploit him. He is a stupid person as his name denotes. Even though he understands that there is no need to fuss about his loss, he becomes tired of entering and coming out of others' mind. He commits suicide out of madness. He hints about his intention to commit suicide, before he is visited by his colleague Broomstick, "There it tolls. The bell tolls. **That's the last bell tolling.** Who could it be? Bai, Bai, open the door." (emphasis added). Instead of being sad, he wants to die when he is in the state of ecstasy:

He: Aah! What a great feeling. Beautiful darkness around me. Darkness without. Darkness within. This is that moment of darkness. This is the knowledge of the self. The knowledge of life. The Ultimate revelation.

(Sings.) Aji mi Brahma pahile. (I've seen Brahma today.)

No one has scolded or talked to him hardly which may pave way to commit suicide as mentioned in Albert Camus' **The Myth of Sisyphus**:

“Suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. The man himself is ignorant of it. One evening he pulls the trigger or jumps. Of an apartment- building manager who had killed himself I was told that he had lost his daughter five years before, that he had changed greatly since, and that experience had “undermined” him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined. **Society has but little connection with such beginnings** (emphasis added). The worm is in man's heart. That is where it must be sought. One must follow and understand this fatal game that leads from lucidity in the face of existence to flight from light.

There are many causes for a suicide, and generally the most obvious ones were not the most powerful. Rarely is suicide committed (yet the hypothesis is not excluded) through reflection. What sets off the crisis is almost always unverifiable. Newspapers often speak of “personal sorrows” or of “incurable illness”. These explanations are plausible. **But one would have to know whether a friend of the desperate man had not that day addressed him indifferently. He is the guilty one. For that is enough to precipitate all the rancors and all the boredom still in suspension.**”(emphasis added)

On the contrary, here it is worth mentioning, the ideas about his suicide conveyed in an article, **A solution to the Question of Absurdity in Elkunchwar's Reflection** by Beulah Rose, are just an opposite to the idea conveyed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In the article, it mentioned, “To Elkunchwar, Reflection was not a nihilistic play for there was no violence and the protagonist was a passive acceptor of events. The playwright says, ‘.....the complete

breakdown of a human being. **If that happens. There is something not with the man but with the environment.... in which he lives.**' (emphasis added) The preoccupation with society is another feature which Elkunchwar shares with the absurd writers. As a lone outsider, playwright, 'displays a bewilderingly stratified picture..... medieval beliefs still held and overlaid by 18th century rationalism and mid 19th century Marxism, rocked by sudden volcanic eruptions of prehistoric fanaticises and primitive tribal cults.'"

She also added in her article, regarding the names in the play, "The protagonist's name is lost. Everyone calls him a Blockhead. This failure to learn a person's name also suggests a lack of personal identity and relationship. The vague background of the hero and his loss of identity all leads to emphasize one point – that Absurdity is a universal human condition. It cannot be circumscribed to one group or a particular region. It is the nameless which is able to bring forth the terror and also a universal acceptability.

Ionesco says that for him the theatre is the exposition of something that is quite rare, quite strange and monstrous. It is something terrible that reveals itself gradually not with the aid and action progressing but rather in a series of events, or more or less complex state of being. And this is what Elkunchwar achieves in his play. There is no proper beginning, middle or end. Yet each scene complements the other. The loss of one's reflection is quite rare, quite strange and monstrous. The following actions in the play are absurd – woman's justification for the loss of reflection; the reasons, given by Flagg, why the hero 'He' loses it; the game of 'Entering one's mind' and finally the hero's suicide.

Blockhead, the protagonist, works in a government office. He feels bored of doing his work. Once, he stood in front of mirror and questioned his own reflection. If the reflection is not the true one of myself, why should I look at it? What am I looking at the mirror actually everytime? Whether is it my body or my soul or my inner self? What is the meaning of standing in front of the mirror, do shaving, beautify myself before starts for office? He could not get any answer for these questions.

When the play opens, when he comes to know that his reflection abandons him forever, he is totally upset, panic-stricken and treat it as a big loss. Whenever his landlady tries to pacify him, he neglects her. She is a widow, lost her husband three years back, treats his tenant as her husband. She feels happy that his tenant will be popular soon or later and she too will be

known to public as a landlady of a man without reflection. She advises him to publish this transformation in newspapers but he opposes her idea.

He raises lots of questions to her to clarify his misfortunes. She blames him that he loses his reflection because of his callousness, laziness and carelessness. She often tells him to look after himself and his belongings. She feels that she will be accused for his loss. She makes fun of him that his reflection leaves him abruptly because it could not bear a man with no values – callous, lazy and careless. She clarifies him that his existence is so far proved by reflection. It can be proved by uniting with someone (marrying a woman). So, he does not need panic about it. Her efforts end in vain. He is not satisfied with her explanation. He assumes himself in a great dilemma. When he realized that there was no use in seeing his reflection in the mirror, he was normal. Now the feeling of loss interrupts to think prudently and to realize that loss of reflection is equivalent to a feel of having reflection in mirror and admiring it often.

The landlady acts a beacon light, whenever the hero is worried a lot. She suggests him a new technique ‘Entering one’s mind’ by entering through a window. First, she goes out the main door and enters through a window assuming that she enters into his mind. He is frightened by her different behavior and shouts at her to get out of her mind and does as she did earlier. When he enters into her mind, she is as dominative as she entered his mind earlier. He comes out of her mind immediately and scolds her of her dominance. She explains that she is dominative because she has such a will power. She asks him:

Woman: If you want to hold on to what you have, you’ve got to fight back in this world.

Then, she persuades him to enter his own mind by himself. When he attempts so, he could see only a hazy spot on him and the rest is totally dark. The telephone, the alarm and the doorbell starts ringing one after another. ‘All the three bells stop ringing. A terrible, tense silence – Followed by, a terrified scream..... Then silence.’

Flags, an acquaintance of landlady, visits her to have breakfast. When she tells about Blockhead’s loss, Flags cares tuppens for it. The protagonist feels bothered about it, but Flags offends him that there is no use in bothering about it, when many people even do not have time to see to it:

Flags: Blocks, do you know that in this city alone ninety-nine per cent of the people live Below the reflection line? Who listens to their complaint?: Only the petite bourgeois like you go whining about things like that. You're really terrible people - selfish and self-centred. Constantly thinking of yourselves and you reflections.....

Flags pretends to be a well wisher of employees and committed to his ideology. He blames the Hero as 'hybrid officers', 'high brow types', 'petite bourgeois' and so on. Later, he shows his true colour. He just looks for his breakfast from the woman. The hero makes fun of his turncoat behaviour:

Flags: The breakfast. My mind's full of it.

He: But were n't you sermonizing on thoughts just the opposite?

Flags: Thoughts from the soul, all of them. I speak them out even in my sleep.

He: Parrot-like!

Flags: D'you mean to say that I talk like a parrot?

He: Yes, you do. You'll know when you lose your reflection.

When the hero and the woman come to know that Flags' reflection looks like a parrot, they started making fun of him, his ideology and his words which they latter often use as a communist. The play slightly hints that there is no meaning in talking about equality, if one starves for his food.

Woman: Here's some toast.

(Puts toast into Flags's mouth.)

He: Here's some commitment.

(Mimes feeding action.)

Woman: Egg.

(Same action)

He: Exploitation.

(Same action)

Woman: Tea.

(Same action)

He: Capitalism.

(Same action)

Woman: Toast.

(Same action)

He: Class struggle.

(Same action)

Woman: Egg.

(Same action)

He: Blood.

(Same action)

Woman: Tea.

(Same action)

He: Revolution.

(Same action)

Woman: Toast.

(Same action)

He: The Masses.

(Same action)

Flags: Enough, enough, enough. I'm full.

He: Have some more.

Flags: No, I can't.

He: How can you be full so soon? I've cooked for you our favourite words. Eat some more.

Flags: I can't. I'll burst.

He: Why should you burst? Store them all up in our stomach. Then you can bring them up when you want. Like a camel. There.

Both of them run down Flags, at last the latter gives up his argument and leaves the place disappointed.

The play comments on the meaninglessness of love making and terms it as searching each other (a lover and his ladylove) in others' darkness in mind. The fourth character Broomstick, a spinster works in his office in the same section. She visits him to propose his

love. He neglects her proposal and comments on how women turn revolutionary after getting married:

He: All girls are tolerant, sensible and humble before marriage. But the moment they have hooked a husband, they start pontificating on liberation...

“The relentless realism of **Old Stone Mansion** contains glimpses of a visionary surreal – the conscious passing into the subconscious and returning to the real – that takes over in **Reflection**, with the protagonist’s loss of reflection, his mirror image, bursting on the mundane which defines his existence as a paying guest in a one-room apartment. Reflection is surreal in the space it creates between the palpable and the impalpable. Elkunchwar avoids the use of the word ‘surreal’ and prefers ‘poetry in theatre’: ‘a play written in excellent “literary” verse may fail to be poetic while a text unadorned by any literary flourishes may have situations that render a poetic glow to the play. **Waiting for Godot** for instance, I wonder if an entire text that are poetic but they lend a poetic charge and luminescence to the whole text by their evocative power.’

The conflict between the palpable and the impalpable, the conscious and the subconscious, comes into its own, in the opening of the play, in a comic game that ringing bells – from the clock, the telephone, and the door – play with the unnamed protagonist; with his waking-up turned into a piece of pure farce. The play of sounds continues for a while, setting the tune for his daily routine on which he embarks as he ‘picks up his towel and goes to the bathroom’. It is left to the landlady-housecleaner to appear at this point and set down a code of norms which the protagonist has obviously defied to her annoyance, underscoring at once the disorientation that has marked the protagonist’s movements and reactions all along. His scream from within followed by his reappearance in a state of frenetic panic is the consummation or a neat piece of black farce.

The ‘discovery’ of the loss of reflection, a shock to the protagonist, appears merely ‘funny’ to the landlady, who would like to put it into the papers and turn her lodger into a celebrity. She cannot understand why he should resist the idea. In her ceaseless chatter, she builds up an elaborate logic to rationalize/legitimize the extraordinary phenomenon. From her cascade of words that leaves the protagonist unrelieved, she moves to suggest game of entering each other’s minds. The game played initially between the two is repeated with the

two visitors, viz. Flags and the protagonist's 'girl' colleague at he office, both of them have lost their reflections; the game proving, in each case, the impossibility of the terms with it, adjusting their personal desires to it, it is only the protagonist who 'realizes' the enormity of the loss and recalls/re-experiences it as a slow process that has been part of his life – 'but I didn't notice'.

As he recognizes, 'So Good. Now I don't have to worry about the future, the past, and the present. Because all time is dark in the same way. And there is no difference between optimism and pessimism' – 'He calmly walks to the window. Climbs up, jumps out'; leaving the Woman, still entrenched in her formidable commonsense, utterly disappointed: 'Nothing wrong in killing oneself. But after falling five floors right into the middle of the road without so much as a sound, or a blood-stain or a traffic pile-up, something huge and black gushed out and spread on the road like sticky oil. What kind of death is that! Huh!' But there is something in that death, even as she tries to accommodate it as usual into her common sensedom, and that is what strikes her into her climactic scream. And once again the 'normal' doorbell goes on ringing along with the scream.'

Elkunchwar uses an elaborate stock of trivialities to chart out the domain of the ordinary with the daily chores, the diversity of ringing bells calling for immediate response/action, and a cumbrous body of unquestioned, conventional ideas and ideologies picked by rote; with habit as the ultimate silencer – and upholder of the tyranny of Order, which, in spite of its illusion of authority and grandeur, is fragile enough to crack whenever a simple individual begins to doubt, and the extraordinary takes over. The ordinary, working out of habit, denies the eruption of the extraordinary and tries to bring it into the confines of the mundane; but all that it manages at the end is to downscale the tragic and the heroic which, in its turn, nonetheless strikes at the acquiescent ordinary like a deadly virus." (CPME,p.xxv-xxvii)

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