

The Theme of Incest in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Desire in the Rocks*

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Mahesh Elkunchwar is one of the significant Indian playwrights. He has played an important role in the shaping of modern, Post-Independence Indian theatre along with other noted playwrights such as Badal Sarcar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, and Satish Alekar. The theatre lovers and scholars in India have noticed this fact. Emphasizing the significance and contribution of Elkunchwar, a noted theatre critic Shanta Gokhale observes, "Mahesh Elkunchwar is arguably the best-known Marathi playwright in the country after Vijay Tendulkar" (270). He writes in Marathi. However, his plays have been translated and performed in the major Indian languages like Hindi, Bengali, and Kannada, along with English and other European languages such as French and German. Vijaya Mehta, the noted actor, and director who has directed many of Elkunchwar's plays accords Elkunchwar his due place:

Of his generation, Mahesh Elkunchwar is the only playwright with a truly pan-India reach. His plays are widely translated and produced in many Indian languages, particularly Bengali. Leading international theatre festivals in Europe frequently feature staged readings of Elkunchwar's plays in English and other European languages. This once again proves his present-day relevance and acceptance even internationally (xii).

Desire in the Rocks is from the earlier phase of Elkunchwar's playwriting career. After the one-act

plays from *Sultan* (1967) to *Holi* (1970), Elkunchwar wrote the full-length plays *Garbo* (1973), *Desire in the Rocks* (Vasanakand) (1974), and *Party* (1975). *Garbo* and *Desire in the Rocks* became controversial plays due to the sexual innuendo in *Garbo* and the incest theme in *Desire in the Rocks*. *Party* got much applause, was staged successfully, and later on, was made into a film (1984). The theme of creativity, its nature, and source, its relation with the artist, the artist's relation with his creation, and society forms a running thread in these plays.

Desire in the Rocks has two characters, six scenes, and no acts. *Desire in the Rocks* is set in an old stone mansion in some distant, remote village on rocky terrain. It deals with man-woman relationships, the males seeking the manifestations of their identities through their female counterparts, females becoming 'the object,' and getting constituted and furnished by the males- 'the men create and women appear' formula. Female in the play becomes the agent, mirror for the reflections for the males, and bring them their true selves. At the same time, the play also takes on a journey towards self-redefinition, self-esteem, and self-realization. One important aspect of the play is the violation of the social sanctions by the characters and the consequent reward in terms of retributive punishment.

Desire in the Rocks (Vasanakand) depicts the incidents in the lives of two characters, Hemakant and Lalita. Hemakant is Lalita's brother. Hemakant and Lalita come together by chance and by choice enter the forbidden, taboo sexual relationships. Their relationship results in the pregnancy of Lalita. Hemakant accuses her of trapping him and depriving him of his artistic freedom and abandons her for a short while. Lalita gives birth to a stillborn. Hemakant returns to her and both face the wrath of the villagers. Lalita takes on the penance by turning herself into a prostitute. The

furious villagers demolish Hemakant's dream forest of the sculptures of pure lust. Both get stoned and at last, Lalita sets the mansion on fire, takes his head in her lap and the play ends as "the whole mansion bursts into flames" (Elkunchwar *Collected Plays* 130).' The play brings in the notions of the violation of social sanctions, the resulting sin, and the redress of it through penance and punishment. It also brings in the notion of 'curse' and its fulfillment through the death of a child and its mother. *Desire in the Rocks* is analyzed with a focus on the two prominent elements in the play - the theme of incest relationships between brother and sister on the one hand, and on the other, the primordial, elemental relationships between man and woman.

The incest theme is not the focal point of the play. At its core lie the vibrant relationships between man and woman. However, the fact that the man and woman in question are also brother and sister provides the play with its outer form and theme. In this regard, Rupendra Guha-Majumdar observes, "*Period of Desire* presents a dark view of the creative processes. It centers on the incestuous relationship between a young girl and her sculptor brother, who exploits her body to create a vision of life in stone" (396). The play opens with the invitation of Hemakant to his sister, Lalita to recruit them in the sexual act, which is responded by Lalita, though with feeble initial hesitance. The play ends with a sense of sin, unchastity, impurity, and the resultant guilt on the part of Lalita who considers their plight as the punishment for their sin. The incest theme looms largely over the play and so their relationships with each other cannot be fully studied by excluding this dimension. The author has taken much care in not to complicate the brother-sister relationship by any material motif of property and/or revenge like in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. There is no attempt either by Lalita to retain the estate legally offered to her by her father, or by Hemakant, who is deprived of his due rights, to possess Lalita for the sake of property. The circumstances why they enter such relationships are brought out in the play.

The delineation of man-woman relationships, specifically the physical- sexual relationships, emerges as one of the prominent themes in *Desire in the Rocks*. The sexual

relationship in the play is a taboo as it takes place between a brother and a sister. The socially unsanctioned and taboo sexual relationship forms the outer layer of the play. But Elkunchwar keeps these facts in the background, in the margin, and focuses on the various aspects of sexual relationships between man and woman. The significant aspect of this relationship comes from the views of men and women to look at the act of sex and their involvement in it. Lalita seeks complete involvement in the act and expects the same from her male partner. Hemkant is unable to share the feelings of Lalita and transcends the mere evacuation lust on his part. In this regard, Supriya Pendhari comments, "The conflict in *Desire in the Rocks* results from Lalita's quest for completeness in her sexual relationship with Hemkant" (161). The difference between men and women to view and experience the same act of sex has been brought out in detail in the play. Their attitudes towards the sexual union determine their relations with each other as well as their view of life in general.

In *Desire in the Rocks*, the theme of sexual relationships between man and woman has been presented in much detail. The second scene of the play brings forth the sharp differences in the views of Lalita and Hemkant towards the act of sex. Hemkant considers his loyalty to the art of sculpture supreme over any of his relations in the world. He has gladly given up his home, estate, and the resulting pleasures of a happy, comfortable life. Now after twenty years of exile he has come to his home and lives with his only sister, fifteen years younger than him. He brings Lalita to one of her old mansions in a remote village with a single purpose in the mind, of carving in stone "the physical manifestations of pure desire. Primeval. Elemental. The eternal beauty and vitality of woman" (91). He entices her into sexual acts just to arouse in her the various voluptuous moods that he could carve out in the stone. For Hemkant, Lalita is nothing but a mere instrument, an object of lust, of pure lust in his terms. He refuses any involvement in the act and performs the sexual act as a means for his art of sculpture. He feels nothing about the act for its own sake. He mentions complete detachment on his part.

Lalita, despite the initial inhibition, for it was a sin to involve in a sexual relationship with her

brother, on the other hand, completely identifies herself with the role of a committed and involved partner in the act of sex. Once she gives in to the calls of the flesh, she is in no two minds, in no fix. She wholeheartedly offers her to him. Neither the social sanctions nor the vigilance of the goddess terrifies her. She wishes the goddess to be the “witness to the uninhibited bliss of man and woman, a symbol of my eternally burning desire” (94). Lalita expresses her wish to immerse herself into the body and mind of Hemkant:

*Hem I want to enter your eyes.
Deep into them. I'll become a tiny
drop of blood and travel through
your body. Through your heart,
brain, mind, soul. I'll talk to your
secrets. Discover all your dreams.
Then I'll turn into a tiny pupil and
live in your eyes. Will you let me
(86)?*

But Hemkant shows no interest in the lovely things Lalita brings to him. His interest lies only in the various postures Lalita takes during her excitement that he could carve into rocks. He refuses to acknowledge her existence even in the sketches he has drawn. For him those are not her pictures but “of heavy, languorous, voluptuous youth,” which has no name and Lalita is “merely the excuse” (88). Hemkant makes her clear that someone else could have easily replaced her. Lalita gets extreme hurt because of the selfish attitude of Hemkant to her:

*How distant you become as soon
as you've got what you want. I'm
the excuse (88).*

Lalita wonders how he can sculpt her without a thought for her. She surprises how come stones are closer to him than her who is alive. She wishes that he should court her, appease her, and shower the flowers of praise upon her. She is ready to do anything to listen to him that she is beautiful. She longs for the love for her own sake that has been for a long time denied to her. She has come with Hemkant for this need to be loved to the brim. She invites him to take her in her entirety:

*Take me in every place, at every
moment. Here in the house. In the
open. Under crushing rain. With
stabs of lightning burning our*

*bodies. ...In all places. Take me in
all places. Because I am yours.
And you are mine (91).*

Lalita expects the same passionate response, love, commitment, and involvement from Hemkant. He responds to her calls by accepting in all places, at all times, not hers but her moods which he will bring alive in stones. He promises immortality to her and her desires and her passions in her sculptures, in art. But Lalita questions him about the passions, feelings, emotions of a living woman that are not the part of his beautiful and immortal but the cold pastoral, the forest of sculpture in stones. She wants to know whether he can cast the feelings that she has in the acts of love in the stone sculpture:

*And what about the call of the sea
that roars through my body in the
moment of union? And the
soothing melody of the flute that
resonates in my blood? And the
myriad tiny bells that ring in
unison? What about all those
things? Will you not build them
into your sculpture (92)?*

Hemkant's response comes in a sharp juxtaposition to Lalita's passionate experience:

*I smell the heady scent of your
hair. I feel the exciting saltiness of
the sweat off your face on my lips.
I feel I'm burning I'm burning as
I sink deep into a red-hot fire. And
then comes darkness. It envelops
everything. Quiet, exhausted. A
void (92).*

This difference surprises and at the same time grieves Lalita. Hemkant has no feelings for her or physical intimacy. Like Shrimant, he too asks 'Where does the mind comes into this?' He explains her that it is a purely physical experience that has to be experienced in its purity. The involvement of mind in it corrupts the purity of physical experience. He advocates the principle of detachment of mind from the physical act “so that you can live the experience. Fresh and full” (93). Lalita expresses her inability to share Hemkant's view to look at the experiences dispassionately, without involving oneself in it. She also explains to him why he becomes a sudden stranger to her:

Now I understand. I've tried so often to hear the call of the waves in your body. I still do. And the flute. And the bells. I have never heard these sounds. I call out to them but receive no reply (93).

Lalita feels estranged, lonely, alienated in Hemakant's company. Hemakant's dispassionate action and Lalita's passionate involvement are not the traits present in the physical acts only. They constitute their vision of life and their responses to the relations with the world outside. Lalita stands for the total acceptance of life with its bed of roses and the paths full of thorns. Hemakant is unprepared for the extreme adversities and pangs of life. Both Hemakant in *Desire in the Rocks* and Intuc in *Garbo* realize that the falsity of their creations and their art results from the fact that they have not lived their life knowingly, honestly. This realization comes to Hemakant and Intuc through their relationships with their female counterparts, Lalita, and Garbo. Intuc confesses:

I'm not capable of writing honestly, because I've never lived honestly. I'm not strong enough for that. ...Compromises and ignominious surrender all the way. Greed and temptations. What right do I have to spit on the rest of the world or to talk of rebellion? A rebel's strength lies in his uncompromising adherence to his principles. Garbo, at least I am able to confess to all this ugliness because of you (Elkunchwar Collected Plays 61).

He accepts that his poems were the words of a fake writer and that he stopped writing because the editors were rejecting his poems. His inability to look at people and the things of life with compassion and his inability to integrate himself with people and life turn him into a failed artist. He sadly notices "What art can worms create" (60)? But in the case of Intuc, Garbo plays the role of the agent of realization indirectly. As for Hemakant, Lalita becomes a direct agent of revelation. She brings to him the falsity and futility of his art, his creation that does not take into account the living things of life, of relationships.

Lalita brings out the shortcomings of Hemakant, the artist:

Artist indeed! Artist my foot! You aren't even human. Your body is filled sawdust. And a heart as lifeless as those of stones of yours (Elkunchwar Collected Plays 103).

Intuc also stresses this point of being hollow within when he compares Intuc, the artist, with a Moharram tiger at dusk, a mere stuffed effigy. Lalita points out the necessity on the part of a true artist to be a true human being first. When Hemakant boasts one has to be born artist to understand the agonies of creation, she clears him:

You have to be born a true human being. I'm true. My blood is true. It's alive. Its impulses are true. They're alive. What can I not understand? Do I not merit even this much, having traveled through fire, burning everything behind me? Why are you deceiving yourselves? You know it yourself. That is why you sit staring at your work for hours in despair (105).

Lalita considers Hemakant's failure as an artist for not being a human, bigger in mind and heart, for not having a drop of feeling. She compares him to a rocky plain where not a drop of rain stays on. The rocky plain evokes the notions of infertility, barrenness, lack of vegetation, and lack of vitality that are the essential ingredients of creation. Hemakant realizes what Lalita tries to make him understand when the enraged villagers turn his sculpture into dust. He confesses he sees now everything clearly, but at the same time, he realizes the meaninglessness of this revelation to him, as he cannot mend the wrongs. Like Intuc, Hemakant considers his art as false as he is:

They [sculptures] are not true. I'm not true either. I'm very false. It came to me suddenly. That night. When the people were smashing them [the sculptures] one by one (125).

He did not try to stop the villagers from the fear that they would kill him too. He realized that he was a coward. He also realized that he did not believe in his creation. The feelings of defeat trouble him. He intended to depict pure desire in all its aspects but ends up in something mechanical, hideous, and filthy. He accepts his failure as an artist. But he fails to know the reasons behind his failure. Lalita brings him the true causes of his defeat as an artist. In this regard, Shanta Gokhale observes, "Hemkant is redeemed by self knowledge before death" (272). Lalita's explanations result from the knowledge and learning she has acquired through the sufferings of her course of life. This knowledge redeems both Lalita and Hemakant.

Works Cited

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