

MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR'S GARBO: PARADIGM OF EXPRESSIONISM

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Abstract

Mahesh Elkunchwar is an important practitioner of the Contemporary Experimental Theatre who plays vital role to bridge the gap between experimental and professional theatre. Elkunchwar has experimented with many forms of dramatic expression, ranging from the Realism to Symbolism and Expressionism to Absurdism. His themes range from creativeness to the life and sterility towards the death and have influenced the contemporary Indian theatre for more than thirty years. His plays have been translated into various Indian and Western languages. His most critically received and commercially successful plays include: Holi (1969), Flower of Blood (1972), Garbo (1973), Desire in the Rocks (1973), Old Stone Mansion (1985), which later developed into a trilogy with Pond (1992) and Apocalypse (1992) Yuganta, Dharmaputra, and An Actor's Death (2005). Garbo presents the story of four individuals: Garbo, Intuc, Shrimant and Pansy. It deals with the physical and psychological relationship among three male friends: Intuc (the pseudo-intellectual), Pansy (the effete), and Shrimant (the Rich) and Garbo, an ordinary film actress-cum- prostitute who struggles to be successful. The present paper attempts to explore the expressionism in Garbo.

Key Words: Expressionism, Experimental etc

Expressionism is a movement, before and after World War I, which came as a reaction against the academic standard like realism, naturalism etc. especially in France and Germany. Expressionism is a visionary distortion in the art, literature and performing arts to express subjective feelings and emotions rather than to depict reality objectively. Expressionism depicts the human being in a state of extremity, confronted with feverish dream states or ecstatic in nightmare. Its mannerisms are sometimes garish and shrill its tone lurid. A.J. Sebastian describes the art of expressionist artist as follows:

The expressionist artist deals with reality in its inner nature and the emotions aroused than with its outward appearance. In order to stress the emotional experience, expressionists exaggerate with distortions and caricatures. (Sebastian 88)

Expressionism in literature, Central and Northern Europe produced a number of important expressionist visual artists: Edward Munch, Kathe Kollwitz, Emil Nolde, George Grosz and Oskar Kokoschka. In fiction, Franz Kafka embodied expressionist themes and

styles in stories such as *The Metamorphosis* (1915), which tells of a travelling salesman who wakes to find himself transformed into a giant insect.

Expressionism dominated the theatre during the 1920s. In the world of drama, it was a reaction against realism, naturalism and symbolism; aimed to show inner psychological realities. Expressionist dramatists include Georg Kaiser, Frank Wedekind, Ernst Toller, August Strindberg and often referred to as the “Father of Expressionism.” Strindberg’s play *To Damascus* (1902) is the first true expressionist play; his play is *A Dream Play* (1907), Frank Wedekind’s *Lulu plays* (1895- 1902), Henrik Ibsen’s *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). Brecht’s *Baal* (1923) and *In the Jungle of Cities* (1923), Walter Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis* (1959) and Eugene O’Neill from America provides an overview of expressionism in literature. The Expressionistic plays have particular characteristics about setting, the plot and structure, characters, the dialogue, atmosphere, music and light and its style of acting.

The plot and structure of the expressionistic plays tended to be disjointed and broken episodes, incidents and tableaux, each, making a point its own. Setting of these plays is non-realistic or partly realistic. It avoided reproducing the detail of naturalistic drama and created only those basically simplified images the theme of the play called for. Characters are nonrealistic, abstract and even non-human. They lost their identity, individuality and merely identified by nameless designation like the man, the father, the son. The Dialogue, unlike conversation, was poetical, febrile and rhapsodic. The atmosphere was often dreamlike and nightmarish. This mood was aided by shadowy, unrealistic, lightening. The supposed time may be past and present or future and the action may flow without interruption from one time period to another. The style of writing is deliberately departure from realism and naturalism.

The Expressionistic plays often dramatize the spiritual awakening and suffering of their protagonists. *Garbo* is known as an expressionistic play with its essential techniques and characteristics. The play is dramatization of the sub-consciousness, a kind of scripted dream with a consequent loss of character motivation. It expresses character’s self-centered megalomania, delusional fantasies of power and inflated self-esteem.

Garbo as expressionistic play epitomizes its characters as more symbolic and expressionistic in nature. The characters lose their individuality and merely identified by nameless designations like Shrimant, Garbo and Intuc. The word ‘Garbo’ sounds pregnancy. Intuc represents intellectuality and Shrimant paradoxically or inconsistently connotes as the richest person. These characters are stereotypes and caricatures rather than individual personalities. They represent a general social group or ideas or ideologies rather than a particular person and appear grotesque and unreal.

The play presents life in a highly personal and idiosyncratic manner. The form of the play; however, expresses deep and profound content. The play discloses secret and hidden state of mind. It is a drama of protest against the rigid lines of the social order and authority in the family and community. Garbo wants to live a liberal and arbitrary life without having

the burden of metaphysical, religious and social values. But, the other characters enunciate the culture forcefully on her. Garbo testifies the failure of social values with a prediction for ecstasy and despair and hence a tendency toward the inflated and grotesque.

The play is mystical even with frequent apocalyptic overtones. It also dramatizes the destructive feelings and struggle against bourgeois values. The character 'Garbo' is rational and practical human with low aims and aspirations. She tries to kill her baby. In addition to this, characters like Intuc, Shrimant and Pansy tyrannically stab Garbo to death. Such apocalyptic actions and overtones are found in the expressionistic plays like Garbo.

The apocalyptic overtones are not only found in the actions of the characters such as Shrimant, Intuc, and Pansy but also in the feelings and fantasies of them. Intuc goes with long desire to see new-coming baby. When his dreams shatter, he becomes destructive and his speech becomes more severe with taboos and abusive words. The destructive and nightmarish fantasies and hallucinations add more effective to the expressionistic drama.

Like other expressionistic play, Garbo is highly poetic and melodramatic rather than intellectual and rational. Illogical consequences, irrational ideas and unreasonable actions are often found in *Garbo*. However, the heart-touching pieces of dialogues of caricatural characters from *Garbo* are grotesquely comic to the audience. The audience does not feel sympathy and menace for the misrepresentation of these caricatural characters. There is no cathartic impulse or sublimation of the audience rather the audience feel alienated and estranged about the false-impressions of these caricatural characters. All the men in the play fall under the spell of their own words and the dream. They conjure up their refuge and chance to create something beautiful. Finally, the act ends with an adoration of the Dream. The following long lyrical song by Shrimant, Intuc and Pansy create poetic exaggeration or overstatement of the character.

*You are the life
And roots of all life
The spring of all hope,
The fulfilment of all happiness
Are you. You are the beginning of belief.
You are the everlasting.
All future sons are in your womb.
Give us your light.
Give us your son.
He will burn up darkness and destroy it.
Retribution in the face of injustice,
Compassion in the face of suffering,
Sympathy in the face of calamity,*

*Courage in the face of death.
This he will be. He we will be creation out of destruction.
Mother! Mother! Mother!*

(Elkunchwar 42)

The speech in *Gabrois* heightened as expansive, rhapsodic, clipped and telegraphic. There are number of bad syntax, fragmented words, sudden breakdown of conversations and restless pause and silences which convey stifling state of characters' mind. Pansy's repression of her laughter expresses:

*Pansy: Shrimant is...is...a...a...sickening...
Shrimant: I say, why don't w-we-g-g-go home?
Pansy: A perfect ...a...a*

(Elkunchwar 29)

Garbo is embodied with profound repetitions, pleonasms of words and sentences. The prolific use of tautologies and redundancies functions to reinforce an idea, contention or disputation. The repetitiveness cannot produce poetic and melodramatic feelings in the play rather they produce monotonous, wearisome, bizarre and tiresome tone. The repetitions articulate character's infertile, sterile, lifeless talks and moods.

*Shrimant: (No one stirs. All are silent, lifeless. After some time, in a tired)
Talk. Will somebody talk? (Pause). For God's sake talk.
(Pause) What's the matter with you, all of a sudden? Like bloody corpses both of them. (Pause) Pansy. (Pansy does not answer. Shouts) Pansy! (Pansy does not answer.)
Pansy! (Furiously, he begins to throw whatever comes to hand from where he is sitting.) A whole morning is wasted.
Didn't meet the soul..... To hell with you. (Pause) And there's is still the entire day to get through. I hope at least Garbo turns up. (Pause) Talk, damn you.*

(Elkunchwar 12)

The repetitions of words sometimes produce emotional overtones of the characters.

*Garbo, garbo, garbo, a new life is beckoning you.
Don't reject it. Come Garbo. Come. Come. Come
and stand in the centre. You are life.
We bow our heads before you. Garbo. Garbo.*

(Elkunchwar 42)

The atmosphere in the play is often dreamlike and nightmarish. The mood of the characters is aided by shadowy and unrealistic lightning and visual distortions in the set. A

characteristic use of pauses and silence is carefully placed in counterpoint with speech. It is held for an abnormal length of the time and also contributed to the dream effect.

The plot and structure of the play tend to be disconnected and broken into episodes, incidents and tableaux, each making a point of its own. Unlike the dramatic conflict of the well-made play, the emphasis is on a sequence of dramatic statements by the dreamers like Intuc and Pancy. Though the play is structured into two acts; there is little action and more a dream vision of the characters. The plot and structure of the play are static, wearisome and circular because the character's life is also the same. The play is a drama of episodes and demonstrations, although they are arranged to stimulate the intelligence of the audience and not to appeal to the emotions of the audience.

Mahesh Elkunchwar has used various dramatic techniques of the Western in his plays. He has experimented with the forms and content. He aptly uses praiseworthy techniques to express his views on the evils, problems and maladies of society. Elkunchwar acknowledges the influence of the various -isms of the Nineteenth and Twentieth century from the Western country such as the Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Existentialism, Expressionism, Imagism, the Epic Theatre, the Theatre of Absurd and the Theatre of the Cruelty and the Western playwrights such as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Ionesco and Anton Chekhov. The reflection of these various -isms and playwrights is figured in his plays.

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