



There is 'No Exit' in the plays of Mohan Rakesh

An Existential Study of Morality versus Individualism in the Plays of Mohan Rakesh

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ABSTRACT

Mohan Rakesh was very socially aware, his characters show how aware he was of society and the way that people think and act in a particular situation. Four plays of Mohan Rakesh are being analyzed from the point of view of Social Consciousness, leading to the whole idea of Morality that really drives society. How the 'boundaries' of Morality keep the characters caught up in situations and states from where there is No Exit. Some characters are not even given a choice to leave, while some are, but with the clause that if they leave – they can never return. The plays that are being looked into are 'Ashadh ka Ek Din' or A day in the time of Ashadh, 'Aadhe Adhure' or The Half Way House, 'Leheron ke Raj Hans' or The Great Swans of the Waves and 'Pair Thale se Zameen' or The Land beneath their feet. The characters, the plot, the theme is looked at from the existential point of view wherein the conflict that is created in the Play between the social concept of Morality versus the Individual choice which the characters are given to either exit or not exit. If they choose not to exit, their hell like situation remains unaltered, unrelenting for all eternity. If they exit, they leave for good. It is actually cruel of Rakesh to treat his characters so mercilessly, but in so doing he has made them immortal, in their hell or in their escape, they live on, well beyond the plays. Key words : Mohan Rakesh, Social Consciousness, Concept of Morality, No-Exit, Individualism, Conflict of Choice

Introduction

Mohan Rakesh sincerely considered himself a writer of his time, this is what he said about his own writing in an interview in 1968, *'The writer's commitment is not just to a particular ideology. He is committed to the emerging reality of his time'*¹. This poignant reality of Mohan Rakesh's time is clearly visible in his works. Even when he was writing a Play that is based a millennium or two before, the 'reality of his time' is explicit.

Mohan Rakesh was very conscious of the world around him, especially the world of the Middle class man in India, the class and the life that Mohan Rakesh knew most of all, and that is what he essentially writes about in these plays. His soul could be said was totally awake to the consciousness of the Middle class man in India, in the same interview he says *'So far as the question of Social Consciousness is concerned, I don't think that we were ever charged with lack of social consciousness; rather, if there were any criticism in this area, it was on the other extreme.'*² What he means to say here is that he is 'extremely' socially conscious, but how can this be proven? Was this dramatist and short story writer as aware of society as he has claimed? Is there any really evidence of this social consciousness in the works of Mohan Rakesh. A few of his works are being



analyzed here from this point of view, that how Socially aware is Mohan Rakesh after all. Four plays will be reviewed from the point of view of social consciousness versus the existentialistic idea of personal choice, namely 'Ashadh ka Ek Din' or A day in the time of Ashadh, 'Aadhe Adhure' or The Half Way House, 'Leheron ke Raj Hans' or The Great Swans of the Waves and 'Pair Thale se Zameen' or The Land beneath their feet.

Mohan Rakesh was a person who delved into the soul of the individual, what were the individual's sorrows and regrets, aspirations and failures, all were terrifically understood by this great thinker and the individual found form in his writings. The individual who wanted to live a life with dignity, but was tormented by all that occurred around him/ her or even within him or her. The protagonist, who was fighting against a myriad of oppressions. Be it Nand from 'Leheron ke Rajhans' who was fighting a lone battle against the desires of his wife Sundari on the one hand, his brother the Gautam Buddha's call to renunciation, his own inner conflict of being caught within the two poles. Or the character like Savitri who was battling, at one side, to keep the tattering 'Halfway House' from disintegrating, and at the other praying for a release in the arms of some man who would accept her for who she was, it did not matter which man, be it Singhanian, or Jagannath, even her own son in law. Or the people caught in the flood in 'pair thale se zameen' who are totally procrastinating about whether to leave the club house or not because the threat of the flood looms over them. The turmoil of the individual is what is clearly and lucidly shown and depicted and investigated in the plays of Rakesh.

O.P. Sharma Prakash puts it, "Halfway House is the crisis of dignity of the individual. Modern man demands individual dignity as well as honour of his choice..... It represents the modern sensibility in all its intensity, form and dimensions."³ Mohan Rakesh does not necessarily resolve the perplexities that exist in the individual, he leaves the person desolate, directionless, somewhat detestable in fact but in every sense human. These were the existential elements that were so prevalent in the plays of the day. In his essay, "Uncertain circumstances, Undefined Individuals: A study of Halfway House", S.G. Bhanegaonkar points out that 'modern psychology does not regard escapism as a symbol of weakness but as a sensitive individual's desire to search for meaning which he does not find in the conditions he is placed in.'⁴ So the characters of Rakesh's play are weak and confused and not at all heroic as one would think of in Greek plays or even the Protagonists of Shakespeare. They may not be plagued with the inactivity of say 'Waiting for Godot' or be as despicable as the characters of say 'No Exit', yet they are completely human and excellent mirrors of the ways of Society.

The Plays and the Characters

Rakesh's characters may be diverse, from the Prince Nand and Princess Sundari in 'Leheron ke Rajhans' who live the hedonistic life before Nand's renunciation, the whole love feast being a very High Society phenomena. Kalidas, the very respected and admirable Indian poet becomes a character in his play 'Ashadh ka ek Din', no doubt Rakesh did receive a lot of criticism for this, but still the play stands among his best known works, from these to the lower middle class characters like Savitri and Mahendranath in 'Aadhe Adhure', and Ayub and the rest socially insignificant characters of 'Pair thale se zameen', the characters may be from any class of society but the message that his plays intend to convey is a message of morality, of seeing what is morally right or wrong. That message was left for the audience to grasp, no matter who or how the characters may be.

The Concept of Morality

Morality is a very complex phenomena. Every class in society has its own perception of morality, from the stand point of its own class. The High class society has its own set of values, has its own norms and way of living which is diametrically opposite to that of the middle class. The High class individual does not bother that much with morals and values and proprietary, behavior and manners have a different meaning all together. The high class does not necessarily have to believe in the institution of marriage for one. Divorces in the high society are rampant, extra marital affairs, bacchanalian orgies type of life style is common. Their lifestyle is



comparable to the debauch life style of the roman era or even the Victorian era of England, where every kind of vice was permissible and in fact even appreciable. Experimentation in terms of sexual behavior, going to the extremes imaginable or even unimaginable, all were part of these societies. Maybe contemporary high society is not that debauch or creative in their vice. But nonetheless high society does not adhere to social norms as do the middle class. This is because the High class society has the money, the power to purchase the values and even the acceptance of their indulgence. They may be frowned on by prudish people, but they are still accepted with all their flaws and all their vices. Because society needs them. Society needs their money to survive and money is the God. If one has power and money, society is more prone to accept one, without any qualms or concerns about how many wives one has had in the past or who one is living with out of wedlock. Or how many illegitimate children one has, all vices are acceptable and understandable when one is rich.

The lower class on the other hand, cannot afford to live with values and morality. They are too poor to bother about what is acceptable and what is not. Their main concern in life is to find the next meal, it does not matter where that meal has come from. It does not matter that they have had to kill or steal to feed their mouths and the mouths of their children. It does not matter that their daughter has been sold to someone, for a night or forever, as long as the money comes to feed the others. It does not matter whether they are married or not because marriages are expensive, why does one need the institution of marriage to procreate? Morality is expensive and to bother with it could be the question of whether they shall live or they should die. They live as a community, and that is their strength, but that community has its own norms, it is its own society, which does not necessarily adhere to the norms of society at large or the norms laid down by religion or even the law. Their society is theirs alone, and that means their values are theirs too, it does not matter if those values are way different from the generally accepted norms and rules of society.

It is only the middle class therefore that really bothers with morality. They are the ones that willingly and conformingly, like cattle to the staff of the shepherd, adhere to the norms of society. They live their lives under the strict disciplinary dogmas laid down by those that form the rules. The Deuteronomy of dogma that makes people conform to a way of life. So they live their whole lives in monogamous relationships, entering marriage as per the whims of their parents and elders, strictly following the rules of society. Having their children study in the acceptable way, taking up the conservative acceptable careers. Following all the rules and customs of religion, giving the necessary dowries to their daughters and accepting the dowries from their son's brides. Never faltering from the tight rope like existence, the strict path which must be followed. A slight step out of the customary will bring ridicule and even result in being ostracized by the other members of society. And how can one do that? It is impossible to live without society, so no matter how harsh the rules are, how demanding or taxing the ways of society might be, one has to live by the rules. A widow cannot dare remarry, a muslim lady cannot step out of the home without the *burkha*. The family must partake of the social events. A marriage party needs to be held to share ones joy. Death too needs to be performed as ritualistically, keeping with the customs. Else the departed soul shall not receive peace post death. So society norms are compellingly adhered to. Because following these norms is the safe thing to do. It gives life direction and a path and most of all - security. Living apart from these dogmas will leave the person isolated and directionless. One will not know what to do, where to go if one does not have morality. And social norms; one must follow them no matter what, to know where life is to take them ahead. So this prison like confine, this 'living in a box' gives a sense of security to the individual, a boundary which should not be crossed, else life shall lose direction and aim. The box is safe, it is secure, it keeps life in check. No one really bothers therefore that there is no way out of the box. It is confining yes, but it gives life a shape. A box like shape, a boundary, a border between the right thing and the desired thing. And from the right thing to do, there is 'No Exit'. The boundary protects but it means one can never be free. There is no exit – no freedom, no life beyond the box.



No Exit

The scenes or rather the stage of Rakesh's plays become the situations from which there is no exit, as it did in the play of Sartre or in the absurd plays of Becket. The stage is what the audience is seeing; they are seeing these characters in their sense of turmoil of wanting to exit but finding None. Such is the situation of the characters in their positions on stage, in their stage settings in the Plays of Rakesh. Reminds one of the lines from the existentialistic song by the Rock group Eagles in the 1970's named 'Hotel California', '*you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave.*' The characters may enter and exit the stage as they please, but they can never leave the play.

So the existential thought is all pervading. Society lives existentially, and thrives on its lack of freedom, its sense of boundary – from which there is no exit. This is exactly what is happening in the plays of Rakesh. The halfway house is crumbling, Savitri wants to move out, Mahendranath does move out for a little while, Kinny is further locked up in the halfway house because she is one who is quite capable of leaving. So she is shut in further in the prison, locked up by Ashok in one room, alone, desolate but with no one feeling pity for her. Binny and Ashok do not bother, in fact to some extent Binny has exited from her own 'Box'. She has left her husband's house, but still has not exited the institution of marriage, so one can easily assume that she won't, eventually she will go back to the desolate, love – less life she lives in her husband's home. Ashok actually is thriving in the box, and is the shepherd like character who is ensuring that the others do not leave. He is 'sensible', understands the lack of freedom that one must live by to ensure the Halfway House does not crumble further. He is somehow the glue that is keeping this house from disintegrating completely. Not the father, not the mother Savitri but Ashok. But the pathos is the Halfway House shall continue to exist no matter what. There is no way that these people shall ever really leave, they will continue to live this loveless, emotionless, demeaning, insulting life, because that is the right thing to do. There is no exit from this situation. The fires of this purgatory that they have created for themselves inside this House will never be put out, they are burning in their hunt for freedom which they shall never have.

The same is the case in 'Ashadh ka ek din', the home of Ambika and Malika is the prison from which there is no exit, but also is the place where the others keep flocking to. One may argue that the characters have to flock to the home of Ambika because that is the scene where the action of the play is intended. But the question is why should the scene be the house of Ambika? It is not an impressive scene. It is the house of a poor woman and her daughter. So why should it be the 'point of No Exit'? The house is a house of love and care and devotion. There is goodness in this house there is purity, there is security, there is healing. There is birth, there is something in this house which is not found anywhere else for these characters. This house lives, with all that is good and pure and sought after, by who? Those who need these things, where values are needed, where hope is needed, where security is needed. The middle class.

Kalidas is the one character that leaves the security of these confines. He chooses to move out of the existential existence of No Exit. Not by his own will, but by the will of Malika, the lady he loves. He attains all that he could hope for from life, fame, name, wealth, position, a family, high class living. Kalidas had it all, but 'All' was snatched away from him as easily as it was given. He comes crashing down and is left desolate with nothing to his name. So what does he do? Come groveling back to this 'safe haven' where he knows he will still be welcome. Yes! He is welcome here, but time has taken its toll, Malika now has a family, a child to look after, a husband to care for. The doors of the haven – the exit is now block to entry. He cannot enter this haven anymore. The security that could be offered to him once no longer can be, because there are others whose security is now of greater concern. Had the guards come to look for Kalidas then, Malika would have been bound to turn him over since she has the baby to protect now. Vilom her husband has priority over the man Kalidas that she once loved. Even though the house of Ambika and Malika is crumbling.



It still is a home of goodness and purity in the small innocent demand that Malika has out of life. Food for her family, love and nurturing of her baby. Caring and healing of the dear as they had together, showing that this home, this prison of No Exit has more values and morality and goodness than can exist anywhere else for these characters. Could there really have been any other place that this play could have created as a scene than this? The perfect picture on values and goodness, of morality and spiritual fervor. But with No Exit, if one leaves, one cannot return.

In *Pair thale se Zameen*, all characters are caught in this situation where they are stranded in the Club House due to the flood. While in this club house they are receiving horror stories about how the flood is rising and how very soon the bridge is about to break. But the characters don't seem to be in any hurry to leave. All except Abdullah, who is trying to herd every out of the club house, quite in the opposite way to Ashok in *Halfway House*, but the others seem to be in no apparent hurry to leave. At the face of it they have their own agendas and reason to stay, their own false sense of security, that all will be well and they have nothing to fear. But that is exactly what boundaries tend to do, give you a sense of security that within these walls one is safe, there may not be a way out, but likewise there is no way for anything to come in as well, so one feels safe. That is exactly what is happening to the characters in the play. Still reveling in their own sense of security, even when things are going from bad to worse. The boundaries, their shell is giving them hope, they can save the situation no matter what. Just pile up some stones to stop the water from entering, make some sandwiches and tea, the terrible things that are happening outside cannot enter this 'safe haven'

But then the floods come upon them. The Club house is flooded, they must leave now else they are all bound to die. So what do they do? They all hold hands and are trying to leave the club house together. To put it another way, the brick wall, the scene, is not what makes the "box" secure, it is the people. The people around you are the ones that will give one strength and security, the people are the real box, the boundary that one cannot cross, they are the ones which provide one with a sense of values, morality and yes safety too. But in this case, at the climax of *Pair thale se Zameen*, the characters see that security is now at its end, they are left desolate, so must face their demons within, which were safely hidden away at the club house, now are there to torment them, Jhunjhunwala's terrible guilt, Pandit's escapism, Ayub's heroism and goodness, the girls' animals within, all are revealed outside the box. They are left bare, without any security to protect them and all await death, which they know is coming at any second. So the only freedom they have achieved from leaving the safe confines of the club house is the tragic freedom to die. But once they have met their demons, shown themselves to the others in all their nakedness of soul, the waters recede. And where do they find themselves? Back in the safe confines of the Club House. They had never really left. Just the scare of having to leave their security had caused them to reveal themselves as they really, truly are. But in reality they live, as does everyone in the middle class, lives from which there is no exit – no freedom. Just safety and security and the 'promise' that they will remain here forever.

In '*Leheron ke Rajhans*' or The Great Swans of the Waves, the scene is the majestic room of Sundari, the wife of Nand brother of Siddharth, better known as Gautam Buddha, in the Palace of Kapilvastu, capital of their Empire. The day is when Sundari has organized a *Love Feast* and invited the whole town elite to the event. It is also the day when Gautam Buddha invites Nand to try to make him see the light and join the ascetic way. The story therefore is of what shall Nand choose, to carry on with his hedonistic life full of all the possible worldly pleasures? Or leave it all for a life of renunciation and live at the feat of the Great Gautam Buddha in search of enlightenment?



Individualistic Choice

The story therefore is about choice, free choice, but what can one choose, between Exit and No Exit. The palace the room of the Love Feast is so attractive, enticing, Alluring. The enchantress so aptly called Sundari, so beautiful, so exceedingly, captivatingly enchanting. Could Nand possibly leave? And then also, Sundari is so good at the game of seduction, so compelling tempting that why only Nand, the whole town could be magnetically pulled to her bed of passion. As is what she is intending to do with the Love feast. She plays Nand to the hilt of her ability, first with love then with emotional blackmail. She orders Nand when he is called away by Buddha even while Nand himself is helping Sundari in completing her morning ablutions, her make up for the day, she orders Nand that he only will have to come and complete her makeup, she will wait, incomplete in her beauty for him to do the job. The tactful ploy of a skilled seductress who is adamant to keep her prey enchained to her, who can so never leave her side.

However Nand does not return through the whole day, another master too is at his work to capture his soul, the great Gautam Buddha himself. While Sundari is enticing Nand through the art of seduction, Buddha does it through discourse, showing Nand the way to *Moksha*, enlightenment, to seek the path of *Nirvana* by renouncing all that is worldly and finding the path to God through *dhyaan*, meditation, giving up all worldly pleasures and pains and finding the reality of the universe, oneness with God. To be free from suffering and pain that all that is worldly brings, to desire, to feel greed, to feel lust, to feel hunger, to feel sad, frustration, anxiety all the negative emotions that plague humans, the Buddha tries to show Nand the way to renounce it all and find the right path.

So herein lies the dichotomy for Nand, at one end is the passion for Sundari, and all the pleasures of the palace, which will all be his till his last day. But on the other side is a life of renunciation which shall have no pleasure, rather it will be a tedious path of a *bhikshu*, a monk who can have no worldly pleasure and will have to literally beg for a living but which promises him complete freedom from want and therefore release and at the end, a way to enlightenment. So from the No Exit from pleasure, Nand has a choice to find the exit that leads to complete freedom. What will Nand choose, when he returns to Sundari, he already has his head shaven off at the insistence of Buddha, but he has told Buddha he still has not made up his mind. So he returns to Sundari, but then the pull to the path to enlightenment is strong and he wishes to leave. The struggle in Nand is strong and overwhelming, but he cannot have both, he must choose one way and renounce the other. Like Kalidas, Nand too has the choice to either stay or leave, there are greater things to be achieved if either leave but like Kalidas, if Nand leaves, he can never return.

So Rakesh does give the characters a choice, but he is cruel there, choose one way, but then forget about the other, there is no going back – Either there is No Exit, or there is No Return. Harsh yes but completely going with the existential thought of angst and despair. To stand at the edge of a cliff and fear the falling off but also the fear of choosing to jump off. That is existential angst which these characters are facing. On the cliff there is life – there is existence, but that is all there is, off the cliff there is the end of life, but also there is freedom. What should these characters choose – that is the Question that they alone can answer.

Conflict – The Conclusion

What also is strikingly contemporary in the Plays of Mohan Rakesh is a sense of conflict. Conflict at various levels in various ways, the conflicts of choices, the conflicts of needs versus responsibilities, the conflicts of material greed versus spiritual needs, the conflicts of temptations versus goodness. So very similar to the conflicts that a person has to go through today, within the person and also with those around him. Like the material wants of say Nand and even Savitri, where Nand is in conflict with the spiritual side to him, to follow Gautam Buddha, Savitri's conflict is her needs versus her attempts to see to the security of her family. Kalidas' love for Malika conflicts with his desire to be the Royal Poet at the King's court. The conflicts of all the people at the Club in *Pair Thale se Zameen* with everything else around them. Be it Nira coping with her needs



to grow up in the eyes of people around her. Be it Abdullah's sense of responsibility towards his boss versus his desire to see his new born baby. Be it Ayub's carnal desires versus his own sense of self-loathing for the man he has become. Salma's love for Ayub in conflict with her need to protect the girls from him. Pandit's hatred for Jhunjhunwala at one side to his need to hide behind the hand of cards where he seems invisible to the world and he too forgets about all the sorrow buried deep within. Everywhere there is conflict. The ghosts seen by Shyamang in *The Great Swans of the Waves* are surrounding all the characters of Rakesh, no matter how many stones are thrown at them, they cannot go. Rakesh's plays are totally existential in this regards. With 'No Exit', the conflicts go on and on and on. They existed before the play started, especially in terms of 'Halfway House', they will continue to remain even after the play. Maybe the flood has receded in *Pair Thale se Zameen* but that which has already drowned in the lives of the characters cannot return. They now have to live with the acceptance of who they have become and what they are. The Great swans have flown away forever, Nand and Kalidas can never return, Sundari and Malika can wait all they want. The pathos goes on, the waiting the wanting, the conflict is all that remains. And that is really how Rakesh had intended his plays to be. In that sense he is a cruel creator, but in his cruelty he has been able to show the audience the reality of the lives that they are leading. Fine there may be no exit for the characters, but the audience is free to understand their own conflicts and make amends. They could lead the better lives that Rakesh hoped his plays would be able to guide his audience towards. Perhaps then there is an exit; perhaps the exit is actually clearly marked in fact. But it is up to the audience to get up from the theatre seats and find it.

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