

**Socio-Politicizing Gender: a Study of Mahesh Elkunchwar's Old Stone Mansion through Masculinity Perspective**

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**Abstract**

Elkunchwar wrote *Old Stone Mansion*, his first full-length realistic play, after seven years' gap from his first play. It meticulously observes the decline of traditional 'wada' culture – ultimately of feudalism – under the stir of changing socio-economic situation generated by modernization and globalization. Under its crush is the Brahmin family, Deshpandes of Dharangaon, a small village in Vidarbha, Maharashtra. Born and brought up in a Feudal family in Vidarbha, Elkunchwar delineates the change at social, cultural and political level; the aversion of Feudal Deshpande family to cope with this change, and its impact on men in the family, and on Brahmin masculinity. The play comments on the suffocation of people, especially the men under the pretences of honour and tradition in a situation where social and economic structures are fast changing. The play also records how the traditional roles of a man as a head of the family, a father, a son, a husband, and a brother affect the lives of men in Indian society. Apart from socio-economic and psycho-physical dimensions, caste, tradition, and duty also play important roles in the definition of manhood in Indian society. In the present paper an attempt has been made to discover how socio-political factors affect the construction of gender. The authors believe that socialization of a male child takes place in diverse ways in different castes and in different socio-political contexts. The concept of being a man changes according to his caste and religion and the present play is a fine example of how this happens in the case of Brahmins in Vidarbha.

**Key Words:** Masculinity, Feudalism, Brahmin Masculinity, Male roles, Masculinity and Honour, Subordinate Masculinity, Class, Caste and Masculinity

**Introduction**

*Old Stone Mansion* is a translation of the Marathi play *Wada Chirebandi*, written in 1983 by Mahesh Elkunchwar. The play was published in Marathi by Mouj Prakashan in April 1985, translated into English by Kamal Sanyal in 1989, and published in the same year by Seagull Books, Calcutta. *Old*

*Stone Mansion (Wada Chirebandi)* is the first part of the *Wada* trilogy, first trilogy ever written and produced on Marathi stage. *Magna Talyakathi (The Pond, Part II)* and *Yugant (End of an Age, Part III)* are the remaining two parts of the trilogy. *Old Stone Mansion* was first performed in Marathi by Kalavaibhav, Bombay, at Shivajee Mandir, Dadar, Bombay, on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1985. A shorter

version of this production under the name *Haveli Buland Thi* was telecasted in Hindi. Apart from its English rendering the play has been translated into other Indian languages too. Vasant Dev translated it into Hindi as *Virasat*. National School of Drama, Delhi, performed it for the first time at Sri Ram centre Auditorium on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1985. Its Bengali version by Subrata Nandy as *Uttaradhikar* was produced by Ensemble, Calcutta, on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1989, at Gyan Manch auditorium.

### **Socio-politicizing Gender in Old Stone Mansion**

In *Old Stone Mansion* Deshpande family is gathered for the thirteenth day traditional funeral ritual of its head-Venkatesh (Tatyaji) – who has recently passed away. Sudhir has come from Mumbai with his wife Anjali. They have left Abhay, their sixteen years old son, in Mumbai. Sudhir's elder brother Bhaskar, now head of the family, his younger unmarried brother Chandu, their mother (Aai), sister Prabha and Bhaskar's wife, Vahini, are engaged in preparation of the ritual. However, family is running short of money. Deshpande family is a Zamindar family in Vidarbha. The government's policy of "Land of the Tiller" and other land reforms around 1980s have had a tremendous impact on the Deshpande family.

Work and workplace becomes a gendered entity in feudal social structure. Certain kinds of work and workplace were regarded as the domain of women and thereby associated with femininity. Apart from its gender bias, work and workplace have a caste bias too. Certain kinds of work, like

labour work, cooking, and some less important agriculture works, were the domain of lower caste people. Feudal social structure socio-politically marked some men less masculine-and others as more masculine. In feudal society, Brahmins were land owners. Other caste people were working as labourers on their fields. Brahmins' work was to supervise these workers. They had powerful position at the workplace. Elkunchwar records the changes coming in this socio-politically powerful position of Brahmins. A character in the play, Bhaskar makes fun of how Brahmins used to till the land. He says,

....We cultivated our lands true. But how? By sitting here on the swing. Idly swinging away, issuing orders. And we lost our estate just by whiling our time away chewing paan. We could never bother even to get up and fetch ourselves a spittoon. If the servant forgot to bring one or was slow in doing so, we just spat out the betel juice towards the corner-sitting where we happened to be. (23)

The powerful position gave Brahmins authority over other caste men. Manhood here meant authority. Masculine essence such as physical strength and sexual potency are irrespective here in which masculinities are created through social interaction among men based on relationship of power and authority. The labourers on the field were economically dependent on feudal Brahmins and, thereby, subjected to the authority of the Brahmins. Lower caste workers had to fetch spittoons for Brahmins to spit the paan juice into. Brahmins never fetch spittoons for themselves to spit juice into it. It was regarded as the lowest of the lowly works.

But now, as said above, because of social - political changes Deshpande family has come in trouble. Total power structure is changed. Labourers, tenants have no more to depend on feudal Brahmin lords.

Under the Government's acts- "*Kul Kayda*" (Tenant's Law) and "*Kasel Tyachi Jamin*" (Land of the tillers) - tillers became the owners of the land. Impact of this fact is reflected in the play also. Landowners (most of which were Brahmins) had to sue tenants in the court. On top of that as Bhaskar says, "[from] top to bottom" there were "all Brahmin haters" in the power. "Not one case got a favourable verdict" for Brahmins (Elkunchwar 34). Deshpande family is left with only twelve acres of land. It is too difficult for Brahmins to do farming in the villages. In Dharangaon, out of the seven Brahmin families, all have left the village and only four have remained. All are in debt. On the contrary, other castes have started other businesses. Bhaskar says,

BHASKAR. They have opened liquor shops and are building bungalows. Some are running trucks. Others are commission agents. If nothing else there is always politics. (34)

But Deshpande men cannot venture into such kind of business because of their love of so-called prestige. Thus, the traditional power of Brahmins to exert control over other men came to an end. This changed power position has threatened Brahmin masculinity. This is seen from the example of family cook Gaja leaving Deshpande family. Bhaskar becomes irate and says,

BHASKAR. The son of a bitch is ungrateful. His father and grandfather took care of the kitchen of the Deshpandes all their lives. He doesn't think of that. (11)

Modernization has given Gaja an opportunity to earn more money by cooking in a hotel at the bus stand.

As labourers have got land, it is too hard for Deshpandes to cultivate the land; still they are not ready to give up the traditional honour of the family ascribed to a Brahmin family by social structure in Feudal society. In the courtyard of the Deshpande there is a tractor. It has never been used since it was bought. Still, Deshpandes are not willing to sell it off. On the contrary when Sudhir says about selling it, Bhasker's wife says,

VAHINI. Didn't rich people have elephants parading in their courtyards in the earlier days, Bhavji? Now in these modern times the Deshpandes have a tractor on show in front of their house. Whether they need it or not. What matters is that you show your wealth. In front yard you have the tractor and at the back you have the palanquin. (11)

This traditional concept of honour has been the cause of Deshpande family's downfall or rather the downfall of all Brahmin Zamindars. Wada is dilapidated. Mice are running in the mansion. Dust falls from the roof. Deshpande men cannot afford to repair such a huge mansion. This is again an insult to their manhood that they cannot even keep whatever their forefathers have earned, let alone adding something to it. Over and above that, for the sake of money, Deshpande men have to sell off big utensils in the family. Even if they are running short

of money because of loss in income, they are not ready to leave the old concepts of family honour. They are always worried about keeping their family honour intact. When Sudhir asks Bhaskar for how much money he sold the huge pots of the family he tells him,

BHASKAR. I did not buy an estate out of the sale, I can tell you. Arrey, if we want to sell pots and pans, can we go to the bazaar openly like other people? It had to be done very secretly, without a whisper, by the back door. The pretence of our prestige had to be kept intact... (29)

Deshpandes were supposed to be rich and wealthy. Deshpande men cannot sell their pots and pans “like other people” openly because it would be harming their dignity.. Manhood here means not only feeding the family, but most importantly, keeping the prestige of the family intact.

All these changes recorded above have affected manhood or masculinity of a Brahmin man at this period of time. It is interesting to see how these changes have affected the roles of men in a Feudal joint family. Samik Bandyopadhyay writes in the introduction of the play,

The *wada* insularity is a product of the large joint family with its hierarchic patriarchy that holds the tensions in check under a facile pretence of authority. The senior males are lazy drones, the elder women are the patient upholders and preservers of the system, the younger males of the same generation are as subservient as the women in their submission of the authority. (Bandyopadhyay viii)

A son has a unique place in Indian society. The son is given tremendous importance in Indian scriptures and social psyche. It is only the son who can carry forward the legacy of the clan. Only he can light the funeral pyre of his father or mother. In any Indian family, male child is desperately needed. In a patriarchal joint family, the elder male of the family is always regarded as the head of the family. After the death of the father, it is the elder son who is supposed to carry forward the father’s legacy as the head of the family. Despite its advantages, men, as the head of the family, have to suffer a lot, especially, in hard times. The expectations that the society and the family has from the head of the family create numerous difficulties for the men. The head of the family is supposed to keep women, children and other members of the family under control. He must keep the honour of the family intact. It creates many problems to head as well as to the other members of the family. The head, supposed to be not requiring to consult others in the family and arriving at decisions independently, in reality must be lonely in this aloofness he has to maintain. All others are only to follow his orders and accept his decisions without any question. This is what Tatyaji in the play is like and Aai gives voice to this characteristic of Tatyaji when she says to Prabha,

AAI. ...what can one do in the face of a man’s nature? He never allowed any opinion but his own to prevail. (44)

When Tatyaji was alive, none of his sons had the courage to advise him or to discuss any work with him. In his presence no one

could hear Vahini's steps even in the veranda. He was revered with awe and respect. It is the social custom and father's obligation to keep honour of the family intact but this has ruined the life of Prabha. Prabha had first class at the matriculation level. She wanted to be a doctor. Tatyaji didn't allow her to study. As she says,

PRABHA ... But a Deshpande daughter could not stay in a hostel alone and study. Their prestige. Their honour. All that would have been hurt. It did not matter that my life was ruined. (30)

This doesn't mean that Tatyaji didn't know he had ruined the life of Prabha; it is the social system which made him to take that decision. Aai says "[he] too had become quite emotional" when he denied her education (44). For many years he didn't speak with Prabha. Prabha thought that he was angry and that's why whenever she entered into the room he used to go out. But as Aai makes it clear later on, he was ashamed of his own action that has ruined her life. This cultural, social tradition becomes a burden that the father/head carries and it distances the father from his children.

Being an elder son in the family, after Tatyaji's death, it is now Bhaskar's responsibility to be the head of the family. This is an adverse time for Bhaskar to run the household. As per the tradition, he has to perform the 'Shraddha' ceremony. The whole village has to be fed on that day.

BHASKAR. Arrey baba, that's the tradition here. On the thirteenth day the whole village

is to be fed. Or else we won't be able to show our faces. (32)

At least twenty to twenty-five thousand rupees are needed to feed five thousand people. There is no money in the house. Village grocers are not ready to give groceries on credit because of dues. Bhaskar's hurt masculine pride is very evident when he says,

BHASKAR. Tell that son of a bitch that no Deshpande of Dharangaon has died leaving his debt behind. Tatyaji is dead, so, what? Aren't we all here? Tell him I shall pay him back even if I have to sell the tiles on my roof. (12-13)

Bhaskar fears that if he does not spend too much money on this ritual, the whole village will laugh at him. Aai asks him to sell off the back portion of the mansion. Still, he fears that villagers will say that the sons have ruined their mother. Moreover, Aai will not like if there is lack of anything in the ceremony because, it is the last expense for Tatyaji. Bhaskar is caught in trouble. At the end, he has to sell off the portion of mansion to Bansilal for fifteen thousand. More insulting to Bhaskar is that the back portion of his mansion will be levelled by Bansilal before the Sharaddha rite gets over..

Traditional notions of fatherhood actually resulted in distancing the men from the family and children. Father was seen as a distant authority. To maintain this authority, they had to keep distance from others in the family. Proximity was a threat to their position. To maintain this distance they went on scolding their children. Though Bhaskar does not like to scold Parag, he does this for

the sake maintaining control over him. This becomes clear when he says,

BHASKAR. ... You won't understand how it hurts (22).

Relationship between father and son, thus, gets damaged. Parag is a young boy of eighteen, has started drinking. According to Vahini the reason behind this is,

VAHINI: He has become like this only because he is terrified. If you shout at them all the time, why should the children stay at home? They are out the whole day. He has got into bad company. That's what happened. He terrifies the children. That's his nature.... (20)

Actually, Parag here finds an alternative way to prove his masculinity. Victor J. Seidler writes in *Young Men and Masculinities*:

Young men gather together in gangs in order to defend particular spaces or territories. Often it is through the control of these spaces that they affirm their dominant masculinities... Teenagers test themselves against their limits as a way of establishing identities independent of their parents. They transgress the accepted rules of social life in ways that expose these rules to inspection (143).

With the other young men, Parag has created his own space where he can be away from the adults of the family and engages in drinking, presumably a 'manly' activity. Parag is terrified of his father so he takes it out on other children by terrifying them. Through the relationship of Sudhir and Abhay, as father and son, Elkunchwar

comments on the change in father-son relationship in modern society. Unlike traditional father-son relationship (depicted in Venkatesh-Bhaskar, Bhaskar-Parag relationship) which is mainly based on distance and authority, modern father-son relationship is based on friendship (represented by Sudhir-Abhay relationship). Unlike in the traditional relationship, now it is the father who thinks of his prestige when he thinks of beating his son.

Being a father it is Bhaskar's duty to get his daughter married. A man's honour, according to traditional ideas of masculinity, is located in protecting the chastity of his daughter and wife. If the wife or daughter goes away with another man, the male of the family loses his face. Society makes him ashamed of himself. His masculinity is endangered. So, special care is taken in every family to 'protect' their daughters and thus protect the family honour. When Tatyaji was alive, girls of the house were not allowed to step out of the door. Bhaskar too says that Deshpande girls do not go "anywhere and everywhere just like that". When Ranju elopes with her private tutor, Bhaskar is more worried about the prestige of the family. He hits Ranju with a whip. He is unable to control his emotions. He "[sobs] without any sound" (53). Such false concepts of family honour are a major problem of contemporary Indian society. Men are more concerned about the family honour than about money or gold or children's lives. When Sudhir says to Bhaskar that they should report Ranju's absconding with Master to the local police station, Bhaskar doesn't agree. Bhaskar's

aversion to register the complaint in the police station is a result of his concern to keep his honour intact. Bhaskar says,

BHASKAR. ... I beg of you, Sudhir. People in the village will spit at us. Let the gold and money be lost. It can be recovered, but not our honour, once it is lost. (54)

We must not forget that it is not ordinary gold, because it has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is 200 *tolas* gold and other jewellery of diamond and money. But the Deshpande family is more worried about the loss of family honour than about the financial loss and that too when they are going through a very tough time. This incident will also have long term ramifications on the younger generation, in this case, on the impressionable mind of Parag who will take the lesson that family honour is the most important matter and that physical violence against women is pardonable if used to save family honour. Increasing incidents of honour killing in the society are the evidences of venomous nature of such notions of Indian masculinity.

Mother-son relationship in Indian society is based on emotional attachment. From childhood itself a male child is attached emotionally to the mother. Father's authoritative and aloof behaviour induces the child to seek shelter in the mother's arms. So, even if Parag has started drinking, it is his mother, Vahini, who takes it casually out of her love for him, which is unjustifiable. It also seems that she accepts this as a sign of Parag's manhood. This emotional bond remains forever. When the son gets married, a third person – the daughter-in-law – enters into this bond.

Mothers always see the daughters-in-law as competitors. Bhaskar and Sudhir are caught in their love and respect for mother and their love for their wives. Even if they wish to, they can't speak their mind in front of their mother for they don't want to offend them. There is no freedom for men to take decision independently. They always have to consult their parents. When there is a widowed mother in the family, the son is under greater pressures. Widowed mother looks at the son as a substitute for her absent husband. Widowed mothers seek in their son the man their husband never was. This is evident in the relationship between Dadi and Venkatesh (Tatyaji).

Being masculine means being self-sufficient, powerful, and in control of your own life. Society regards masculinity as almost equivalent to freedom. Whenever one is powerless and dependent, he is regarded effeminate. Unemotional, powerful, selfish, intolerant, aggressive, and somewhat arrogant men who are being in charge are preferred and respected over those who are respectful, highly obedient, and emotional and followers instead of leaders. Bhaskar is the elder son of the family of Tatyaji, so he has more power than Chandu, who is the younger son of the family. Senior position of Bhaskar in the family gives him power. Of all the male and female characters, Chandu is the most harassed character in the play. People like Chandu don't have a respectable position in a joint family and in society. Chandu is a mute sufferer. He is powerless, reliant, emotional, not in control of his own life, and answerable to almost everybody in the family. Besides, he is unmarried. Prabha,

Chandu's sister, is unmarried; so Chandu couldn't marry before her marriage. Maharashtrian families follow the custom that until the elder sister in the family doesn't get married, younger sons can't marry. Chandu is the victim of this custom. Joint family gives Chandu work in house: collecting firewood, taking care of Dadi, giving water to the cow, bringing home grocery, etc., which are traditionally chores reserved for women. He is just like a servant in the family. Aai expresses her concern about Chandu,

AAI. How much more are you going to suffer? You toil in the house. You toil in the fields. You have held the whole household in the palm of your hand. You run it. What is going to happen to you, my dear? (52)

So, even if Chandu is the person working the most in the family, like women, he has no say in the family. When Aai wanted to press his legs he doesn't let her to do so because he thinks he should be pressing her legs and not vice versa. Chandu is dependent on Bhaskar, so, even if he desperately needs to go to a doctor he is unable to as he does not have money. Economic dependence causes Chandu to go on working with his swollen leg without taking any treatment. Bhaskar does not care for Chandu's wound; nor does he give him money to see a doctor. When Vahini talks to Bhaskar about Chandu's hurt and groans his casual reply displays another feature of masculinity: men expect other men to be independent – both financially and emotionally. Bhaskar says, "Can't he go himself? Is he a small boy?" This means, unlike women and children in the house, a man should not need anyone's

help. However, Bhaskar doesn't help Chandu to achieve this independence in any way. When Chandu wanted to open a small shop somewhere, Bhaskar said "it does not become the honour of the Deshpandes" (52). Chandu too agrees to this and puts an end to the idea. In all, along with rigid traditional values of the society, financial dependence also takes its heavy toll on the weak people like Chandu. At the end of the play Chandu is left with the leg wound turning septic. He is not attended by anyone. In the second part of the trilogy, in *Magna Talyakathi*, we come to know that his leg is permanently crippled. He has left *Wada* and has gone to live in the nearby temple and the family provides just daily food to him.

Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion* is about the decadent Brahmin community living in the cocoons of false family honour brought to them by their erstwhile powerful positions in the society. The community is caught unawares in the changes in social structure. Through the trauma of the Deshpande men, Elkunchwar brings to light problematics of Brahmin masculinity in decadent period. Unable to give up traditional concept of honour, a paramount characteristic of feudal Brahmin masculinity, the Deshpande family is on the verge of destruction. Elkunchwar's play is about this change in society. Sudhir's act of leaving Dharangaon reflects this change and the move made by these Brahmin men to metropolitan centre away from the traditional rural roots. *Old Stone Mansion* records the socio-political and economic changes affecting men's lives and masculinity. The play also sheds light on the



oppressive nature of the hegemonic masculinity which harasses men, women and children equally.

### Conclusion

Around 1970s and 1980s numerous economic changes took place in the country. Government of India took numerous decisions for development of Indian economy. One of them was the law regarding 'Land of the Tiller' or 'Kul Kayda'. Mahesh Elkunchwar shows hegemonic masculinity of feudal Brahmin community in crisis under the wake of changing socio-economic situation caused by modernization, globalization and land reform in India in 1980s. Elkunchwar throws light on the problems and tensions of the feudal Brahmin masculinity and shows how it causes not just women but even men to suffer. In agriculture, menial work started gaining increasing importance. Working class and business class masculinity became dominant, endangering Brahmin masculinity. Changing socio-economic structure of the society and the burden of traditional concepts of pride and honour attached to feudal Brahmin masculinity has made the lives of every member of Deshpande family difficult.

*Old Stone Mansion* records the impact of socio-economic changes on subordinate masculinity also. Chandu in *Old Stone Mansion* is a 'feminine man' who shows the characteristics which are not typical to his gender. Chandu is weak, passive, powerless, and unable to take his own decisions. He does homely chores, traditionally regarded as less important works for men. People like

Chandu were better off in the feudal system because of their birth in socially dominant and economically powerful high caste feudal Brahmin family. They could pose to be more masculine than the strong and sturdy workers because of their social position. But now, in the changed times, Chandu has to accept work done traditionally by lower class people in Deshpande's mansion.

As a response to the changing time, Elkunchwar constructs father-son relationship on the criterion of mutual understanding between father and son. In feudal joint family, father-son relationship was based solely on fear and respect. Son had no freedom to communicate freely with father. Through the relationship of Sudhir and Abhay, Elkunchwar constructs father-son relationship based on rationality.

Elkunchwar explores the middle class Indian masculinity facing domestic and social upheavals and what it means to be a man in changing times. The problems of Brahmin Maharashtrian male after the fall of feudal system is the concern of Elkunchwar. Elkunchwar's play deals with masculinity and its increasing complexities in decadent times. The collapse of feudal system and the crisis it caused to the Zamindar Brahmin community brought about literally an identity crisis for Brahmin men who found themselves trapped between the old notions of honour and the actual loss of power and wealth. The drastic changes around them warranted these men build their identity from the scratch. This has far reaching consequences for their 'masculinity' and Elkunchwar successfully reconstructs this turbulent time and confusions in the play.

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