



MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR'S *FLOWER OF BLOOD*: A THEMATIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at analysing the translated play entitled Flower of Blood written by Mahesh Elkunchwar. It was originally drafted in Marathi by the title Rakta Pushpa (1972). This play has various themes, but especially it focuses on the relationship between family members, such as mother-daughter, father-daughter, husband-wife, and a boy-girl. And when the death of a family member takes place, it changes lots of things, sometimes due to this mishap family members get more close to each other and sometimes everything shatters. Flower of Blood is a play that shows how a death of the son breaks the mother, sister and father and due to this, the relationship gets complicated between them. The complications become unbearable when an outsider takes the place of that dead son. The point of view of everyone towards the boy is different. The present paper is an attempt to focus on why the intimacy has lost, and bitterness came among the family members, how and why sexuality becomes a major concern between daughter and mother relationship and reaches its peak, the lacking of mutual understanding in marriage, etc.

Keywords: *Libido, fixation, repression, menstrual cycle, menopause*

INTRODUCTION

An experimental Marathi playwright, Mahesh Elkunchwar is a prolific and reputed name among Marathi dramatists. He is known for his outstanding plays in Marathi and therefore comes his name in the same breath as of Vijay Tendulkar. He is also known for his plays as the successor of Tendulkar who has given a new tradition and direction to the history of Marathi theatre, but he has not copied him. Elkunchwar has forwarded his tradition but in his style. Therefore, he got a vast number of audience and readers for his dramas. He has been honoured by many prestigious awards in India as well as in abroad. Almost all the major

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theatre directors like Vijaya Mehta, Shreeram Lagoo, Amol Palekar, Satyadev Dubey have directed his plays; like *Holi*, *Old Stone Mansion*, *Sonata*, *An Autobiography*, *Pond*, *Apocalypse*, etc. His *Wada Trilogy* is the most famous among all and regarded as the canonical texts of Marathi literature. His plays have been gained a wide attention among the readers, theatre lovers as well as media and theatre critics. His plays have such themes that leave the audience to think. His plays have been translated from Marathi into various Indian and Foreign languages. *Flower of Blood* is one among these plays.

Raktapushpa was written originally in Marathi in the year 1972. The first draft was published in the Diwali issue of *Yugwaani*. It was first produced and performed in Hindi as a Theatre Unit Production at Prithavi Theatre Workshop, Mumbai, on 5 February 1981, probably because of its possible allusions of female sexuality. It was translated into Hindi by the name *Arakta Kshan* and into English as *Flower of Blood*. It was translated into English by Shanta Gokhale, a playwright, novelist, journalist, editor, translator, theatre critic. In short a multi-talented personality. Shanta Gokhale is a pivotal figure in Marathi literature and non-Marathi reader. According to her, in Marathi literature and theatre there are lots of things that are unknown and to be explored by the non-Marathi reader and audience.

Mahesh Elkunchwar, who is a pioneer playwright in Marathi theatre, has experimented with various themes, issues which have created a uniqueness and marked him an exception among the other dramatists of the contemporary era. In *Flower of Blood* he has dealt with women's psychology, the constitution of marriage, a bond of faith, mother-daughter relationship and the young age dilemma. It has presented through the two female characters- Padma and Leelu and two male characters Bhau and Raja. In the introduction of *Collected Plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar- Vol II*, Anand Lal has mentioned about this play as: "Raktapushpa is an excellent example of Elkunchwar's fine ear for the kind of conversation one hears in families...where the partners hate each other as a result of the tragedy in which they lost their son, the absence of love and their mutual revulsion affecting their daughter and paying guest" (xvi). Vijaya Mehta who is a renowned theatre director has also mentioned about this play in the same book:

"Flower of Blood is one of Mahesh's first conscious efforts at handling and sculpting layered relationships- a phase distinct from his earlier one, when he was experimenting with stretching and discovering his own theatre idiom. The play is about a mother-daughter relationship; its context is womanhood and sexuality- the mother about to lose it to menopause, the daughter about to be blessed with it in puberty. Here was one more subject presented for the first time in Marathi-or for that matter in Indian theatre" (xvii).

Thematic Analysis



Womanhood and Sexuality: *Flower of Blood* is a play in which Elkunchwar has shown womanhood and sexuality through the characters of mother and daughter- Padma and Leelu, who are in two different age groups. At one hand where Padma is entering in the adult state of age and reached the menstrual stage, on the other, Leelu is in her teenage and going to be blessed with menstruation cycle. The title of the play is symbolical. It symbolises the sexual instinct, which arouses from the menstrual blood. The flower is the libido instinct which is pure. The flower is common but the blood is different. The one thing that is common between the two is the sexual desire, the mother who is going to lose this physical passion and the daughter who is going to discover the libido that is unknown instinct for her. The sexual characteristic is same, but the point of view is different. It seems that it is the theme that is related to mother-daughter is not handled by any of the writer contemporary to Elkunchwar. He has experimented with such an idea which was entirely new at that time. None of the authors had tried to write on this subject, but Elkunchwar did it very beautifully and exquisitely. Female's anatomy is quite different from males and therefore tough to understand it wholly. And when it comes to menstrual cycle every one becomes silent. It is a social taboo that is why people try to escape from these kinds of topics. Even today it is not considered as an issue that can be talked openly. Although *Flower of Blood* also not talks about especially on this topic directly but somewhat it indirectly focuses on it. The two female characters of different age groups find it different. If for Padma it is exquisite, then for Leelu it is unravished.

Mother-daughter relationship:

Mother-daughter relationship stands for purity and is justifiably sacrosanct. It cannot be weighed or measured; it is endless like the horizon. It is a beautiful treasure that every mother and daughter have hidden inside themselves, sometimes it is visible, and sometimes they indirectly pour their love on each other. Conflict comes when this beautiful relationship turns into an unbearable pain and starts hurting to both of them mother as well as the daughter. The tension between these two is visible from the very beginning of the play, especially between Padma and Leelu. The relationship of mother and daughter lacks the intimacy, love, respect, affection. In the opening of the play, it can be seen through the conversation among them. Both of them talks to each other in a very harsh manner:

(Leelu comes in with a cup of tea)

BHAU: *Is that for me, my little one?*

LEELU: *yes.*

BHAU: *And for Aai?*

LEELU *(Harshly to Padma): Do you want some?*



PADMA: Is there some left?

LEELU: Just tell me do you want some.

PADMA: But...

LEELU: What's all this fuss for? Just tell me if you want some (Elkunchwar 30).

It seems that she scolds Leelu every time and for her, she is a grown up girl. She does not treat her as a child of her. The reason for this bitterness in the relationship is the common character that is present between them is- Raja, who is a paying guest. Padma is sympathetic towards him that is disliked by Leelu, and due to this attitude of hers, Leelu's heart filled with bitterness towards her mother. Leelu is unable to understand why her mother behaves with her like this. Therefore bitterness towards her mother increases. Leelu is a little bit sympathetic towards her mother because she cares for her medicine and health. She talks about Padma's health with her Bhau that she does not takes medicine in time and neglects herself. Also, she regrets on her behaviour with her mother and that is why she asked her father that she does not know how to behave with Padma. The main reason of Leelu's agony is Raja. Whenever Padma starts talking about Raja she fills with fury and rage and in this process, she shouts over her mother. Leelu hates her mother caring for Raja more than her. It might be possible that it is also one reason for her rage and disappointment towards her mother. The love and attention that Padma should give to Leelu were absent. Leelu wants love from her mother as a child. When her brother was alive, her brother was her mother's attention and when he is no more, the focus shifted to Raja. This created a huge gap between mother and daughter. The hatred was present in Leelu's mind but at that time it was in unconscious level because Shashi was alive and she loves him. When Padma's care and attention shifted to Raja instead of her, the hatred slowly came to the conscious level and showed through her actions and dialogues. The jealousy that was hidden in Leelu's heart towards her mother transforms into hatred at the end of the play. The mother-daughter relationship gets tensed, and at last, when she founds few letters in her mother's room related to Raja she gets shocked and burst out in these words:

LEELU(smouldering with fury): At least I wasn't there in a gold-embroidered silk sari.

PADMA: Say that again.

LEELU(screaming): I will. I will say it a thousand times. I am ashamed of you. You are no mother. You're a dirty woman. Look at those letters. These...these...all these letters. I found them all in your room. (Throws them down.) Dirty, dirty woman, that's what you are. I don't sneak into Raja's room. It's you that go in there. You go there a thousand



times a day (Elkunchwar 60).

On the other hand, Padma who has lost her son- who was a just twenty-one-year boy; is mentally disturbed due to his death and taking medicine for depression. It seems that she sees her son in Raja who is a sixteen-year-old teenager, one year elder to Leelu. It is not sure whether her intimacy towards Raja is just like as son or it is something else. Perhaps it can be said that the intimacy towards Raja reached beyond the natural affection and that is why her interest towards Raja is disliked by Leelu. In the midst of love to a male child, Padma forgot to provide the care and affection that Leelu wanted. In the past, her centre of attraction was Shashi and now this place has been taken by Raja. Consequently, she lost her daughter and in this process, the birth of a competitor happens in the face of her daughter.

Padma has no control over her action and words. When she talks with Bhau, she presents herself as if she loves Leelu so much and cares for her. In contrast, Padma hates to see her daughter speak with Raja. She makes various restrictions on her. Padma says to Leelu that she must wear saree instead of skirts and must not comb her hairs outside the door, etc. The one thing that she highly disliked is that she cannot see Leelu with Raja. It is a feeling of jealousy that emerged inside her, and therefore her daughter emerged as the biggest competitor for her. In jealousy she complains to her husband that Leelu is no more a child; since she and Raja both are in same age, they must not talk to each other. According to her, this is a very perilous period, and therefore they must take care of her. She gets infuriated when she heard from Raja that Leelu was in his room and enquired to him what they were talking about. Every activity of Leelu was noticed by Padma not in a positive way but always in negative. Hence the mother-daughter relationship never built between Leelu and Padma. If it was, it was just hatred and jealousy.

Adolescence age dilemma: The relationship between Raja and Leelu:

Leelu is in the age of puberty. Reaching to the age of puberty influences the first feeling of love and first experience of sexual feelings. Teenage is a phase of life where everything seems confusing and every little matter as a serious issue. It an age of fun, excitement, joy, enthusiasm but connects with various kinds of problems as well. For Leelu she is in the midst of a plethora of challenges, like education, self-esteem, parents love, loss of brother, attraction towards opposite sex, depression, menstruation, adolescence age confusion, etc.

The relationship between Raja and Leelu is quite confusing. In the opening scenes, it has shown that she does not like Raja. Whenever her mother calls his name, she gets angry as if he is the biggest rival of her. As the play proceeds, the relationship between her and Raja gets changed and transformed into friendship. She is confused about her strange relationship with



Raja. Sometimes she shouts on him and says to leave her house yet another moment she gets calm and behaves very nicely with him; it seems that she likes him and Raja too likes her. Raja admits during the conversation between him and Leelu that he brings a flower for her every day. He hesitantly gives her a red flower. She shows regression by saying that they are doing wrong and they should not do this. The playwright has beautifully presented the bud of love between them:

LEELU: Raja,

RAJA: Yes?

LEELU: What were you going to say?

RAJA: Nothing.

LEELU: Raja, are we doing something wrong?

RAJA: Why?

LEELU: I think we are talking a lot of rubbish. About love and things like that (Elkunchwar 52).

Again in the last scene, she finds him as a cause of destruction, who is becoming the reason of spoiling the mother-daughter relationship. She fills with hate and anger towards him. Hence in an authoritative way she asks him to leave the house immediately. It is neither the love nor friendship. It seems that it is a kind of infatuation and attraction between them. The hesitation, fear, joy, anger, fight, intimacy, friendliness, etc. everything that happens in this age between the young couples, Elkunchwar has portrayed though these two young children and their bonhomie exquisitely.

The relationship between Raja and Padma: Raja is an illusion for Padma. Sometimes she takes him as his son, and sometimes her sexual urge comes to the fore. It seems that Padma wants him very badly to fulfil her libido instinct but not physically. She is unable to suppress her both roles- the mother and a woman whose sexual desires are unfulfilled. She tries to keep Raja near her because she loves his company. During this process, she used to tidy his room by herself, makes tea and food for him, wash his clothes, etc. She tries to ask him what he likes about her and does according to that to impress him. For example, she wore that silk sari which Raja asked her if she ever wears it. She enters in his room with the same silk sari. She takes the chances to touch him and use to go to his room in his absence, likes to talk him too much. She does not even charge the rent from him and says him to make it a secret between them. But Raja does not like this kind of behaviour of hers. He feels uncomfortable in her company but doesn't show that and therefore tries to avoid her. Sometimes he gets furious on this extra affectionate behaviour.

From the psychological perspective it can be said that Padma is unable to control her Id; therefore she is going against social norms and hence conflict arises between her frustrated



desires and social norms. In this way, she takes her daughter as the rival of her. It seems that she is unable to leave this stage or do not want to leave it, hence cannot proceed further. The reason is that, she is not getting the thing that she wants and therefore it comes out in the form of frustration and bitterness which gets increase day by day towards her daughter. Therefore she reached to the stage of fixation. She lives in an unconscious life. She has repression because of the premature death of her son. This incident relegates into her unconscious mind and slowly comes out when she sees Raja. At the opening of the play, it is shown that she is taking medicine. It might be because of the mental shock in her mind due to her son's death. She is obsessed with his death and unable to cope out of this grief. Therefore she has made an illusionary world around her in which Raja is the central character. Her every action revolves around Raja. The attraction of Padma towards Raja passes through three stages- agitation, affection and desire. The unconscious desire first undergoes the process of agitation. In this stage the absence of Raja makes her yearn. Therefore she used to take his name in his absence and write letters. The agitation transforms into affection. In affection, she does every work of him as if she is doing for her son Shashi. At last, this affection slowly takes the shape of desire. In this juncture, she wanted to keep herself near him. She tries to win over him when she dressed in that silk saree which Raja suggests her. Padma is aware of the fact that her relationship with Raja is not acceptable because it is the traditional mindset of society that cannot accept a relationship with an elder woman with a young boy. On the contrary, an old man- young girl is never criticised and it is easily digested by the same society. Therefore Padma tries to fill the gap privately, that has been developed between her and Bhau, by involving herself with Raja. The role of Padma is somewhat similar to Martha of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962), a play written by Edward Albee. Martha also does not want to accept the reality that her son is no more and hence both of these characters try to escape from reality.

Marriage- a complicated relationship between Padma and Bhau:

The relationship of husband-wife demands love, sacrifice, respect, compromise, unconditional support. It is essential in this relationship that both of them should be able to deliver their thoughts and feelings to each other. It not only helps in understanding each other but also it helps them to view and understand the world from others' perspective. Other than this one thing that should present in both of them for each other till their life, is the romance. It makes relationship lively and refreshed. In the midst of uncountable responsibilities couples forget romance, to give time just for themselves and in this process, one of them might get psychologically away from other. This is what happened with the character of Padma. Padma is a victim of traditional Indian marriage cult. She and Bhau both became so much busy in the responsibilities that they have forgotten that there is thing that is called love, should also be present in spite of other responsibilities. Bhau somehow overcome from



this stage but Padma does not. Externally she is a mature woman but internally she lacks the intimacy that she is trying to find it outside the bounds of conjugality. It was the desires, urges of her that were suppressed not only in the present age in which she is but across the years in her unconscious level. When she came in contact with Raja, her unconscious desires start coming to the conscious level, and hence she adopts the other way to fulfil them. At present she is in the age of turmoil, she wants something more than her age. The romanticism, admiration, attention that she wanted from her husband was lacked. She complains him why he had a very little indulgence on her, why he used to come home late every day, why her waiting at night doesn't bother him, why making love in this age bore him, etc. Therefore, one by one her dreams started getting shattered because she is not able to find the kind of expression from him. She wants something more than her age, and that is why she is fascinated by all those love making moments that she wanted to do with her husband but she is not able to find the right expression. As a result, when Raja came in contact with her, she forgot her age, her role of mother and wife and started playing the role of a girl who tries to impress a boy on which she got attracted. Sometimes it seems that she does not realise that it is her sexual urge which is coming to the fore, but at another, her conscious level is active which knows that the relationship she is trying to build with Raja is not acceptable in the society. It can be said about her that she is cheating her husband by doing so, but she is not disloyal. She is just trying to identifying her romance that was suppressed somewhere in the unconscious part of her mind. It is just another way to come out.

The character of Bhau has been shown as an affectionate father and a caring husband. The care he shows towards his wife is not sufficient. The way he talks to her tells the formal attitude of his towards the constitution of marriage. He never understood his wife and her desires. It might be the social pressure of livelihood that affected their relationship. From the conversation between husband-wife, it can be assumed that he wanted everything fast, without any delay. On the contrary, Padma fantasises everything with extreme love and affection. Therefore a gap came between them. Bhau blames Padma for these complexities in their relationship and hence asks her if she wants divorce. Padma transfers this question on Bhau, but soon conflict comes in their relationship, and they prove that the constitution of marriage is not so weak that can break easily instead it is the strongest bond of love which cannot be shattered even by the most powerful troubling waves.

Father-Daughter relationship- Leelu and Bhau:

Leelu, a fifteen-year-old girl, gets scorn by her mother every time. She is facing the confusions of adolescence. She has insecurities in her life. In the conversation with her father, she tells him that she is not rude. She just does not know how to behave with her mother. If



she does not talk to her it makes her fly into rage. She had an insecurity that her mother loved her brother more and now since he is no more she feels insecurity from Raja. She thinks that now Raja is taking his brother's place. She does not like the behaviour of her mother towards Raja. She underrates him because she thinks that he is trying to occupy the place of her brother and therefore she scolds him by comparing with her brother:

LEELU: I'm only telling you because Aai keeps saying a hundred times over, 'He's like Shashi to me, he's like Shashi to me.' Well you're not. See?... nobody can take Shashi-dada's place...you can't. There is no way you can. (Viciously) He never was a sissy like you. He was six feet tall. Kept hitting his head against the top of the door way. And what a sportsman. He won university colours. When he laughed the walls used to tremble. And hundreds of friends he had. And your? The minute classes are over, you follow your nose straight back home (Elkunchwar 47).

The one person that loves her is his father. She finds solace on his lap. She asks to her Bhau if he likes her as much as dada. The negligence she feels can easily be seen in this question of hers that she feels discrimination. Her father assures her that there is no difference for him between the two. Secondly, the pieces of advice he gives to her for Padma shows that he cares for his wife as well. For him, he has only Leelu left. Therefore he provides her lots of affection, attention and care. He scolds Padma for her rude behaviour towards Leelu. The conversation between daughter and father provides a soothing effect in this tensed drama. It shows that the bonding between them is powerful. At the end of the play, there is a conflict that indicates that Bhau who always favours Leelu suddenly stands against Leelu and slaps hard when she tried to prove her mother a dirty woman. A mystery suddenly arises for her why her father suddenly became rude to her and at the same moment, she gets apart from him.

The play is full of many significant themes that should better to evaluate them individually rather in accumulated form. These are such themes that are very close to the modern people. Elkunchwar's plays are experimental with a slight of absurdism. His plays present a social commentary on the issues and topics that he deals. *Flower of Blood* offers an excellent example of it.

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