



## THINGS FALL APART IN MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR'S *THE OLD STONE MANSION*

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### ABSTRACT



Article Info:  
Article Received 25/3/2015  
Revised on: 26/4/2015  
Accepted on: 22/5/2015

Mahesh Elkunchwar's play *Old Stone Mansion* (Wada Chirebandi) is a classic Marathi play depicting the degenerating feudal order of rural Maharashtra. It effectively presents the decline and fall of the Brahmin family of Deshpande's and their helpless attempt to survive in the changing social scenario after the independence when reforms in land acts allotted the excess land of landlords (Zameendars) to peasants and labourers who tilled it. The economic and social authority of Brahmins was declining and the play effectively presents the things falling apart in Deshpande family due to friction resulted by socio-economic forces of changing time.

**Keywords:** *Feudal Order, Maharashtra, Brahmins, Social Order.*

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The play, *Old Stone Mansion* (Wada Chirebandi), begins on the fifth day after the demise of Tatyaji (Venkatesh), the patriarch of the Deshpande family of Dharangaon. Dharangaon is a small hamlet in the interiors of Vidharbha region of Maharashtra, where the influences of commercial Mumbai have slowly spread its tentacles. The play begins with Aai, the widow of Tatyaji, awaiting the arrival of her second son Sudhir and his wife Anjali from Mumbai, to attend the 13<sup>th</sup> day rites. In the meantime, the eldest son Bhaskar and his wife, Vahini, have taken over the reins of the family by taking charge of the two objects on command, the

keys and the ancestral jewellery box. Being a traditional Brahmin family, Bhaskar intends to conduct the rituals in full traditional fanfare even when the family faces financial crisis. Bhaskar expects Sudhir to bear the expenses, as his image of someone from a big city is that of financially well off, while Sudhir claims that he is just about making ends meet in his two room apartment in the outskirts of Mumbai. Thus the first crack in the already crumbling household begins. Ranju and Parag, the fourth generation, feel the need of escaping from their Wada as they feel stifled in a time stuck place. The obvious destination is Mumbai.



The split in the family widens when each starts claiming their own. Ranju, with cinema in her head feels her private tutor can be a vehicle to reach Bombay. Parag, who has moved in the wrong company, wants to change his ways in a far away land. Prabha the sister of Bhaskar and Sudhir wants to further her higher studies as she fears that she would end like other ladies in the Deshpande household.

The play presents the personal conflict between brothers which ultimately becomes the social conflict. Bhaskar thinks that his younger brother has a good financial condition and he should bear the expenses of his father's final ritual. Sudhir also declares that it is difficult for him to manage the expenses in a city like Mumbai and his brother's family is happy in the village. However, Elkunchwar gradually shifts the focus of personal conflict to that of social where the family discusses the larger issues of maintaining financial and social position for Brahmin families in villages when a very few Brahmin families have left in villages and they also have lost their hold in society after independence. The vanities of Indian traditions are also very much revealed through the ritualistic practices and the arrangements made by Bhaskar and his family after the death of their father. Furthermore the play introduces the family conflict between the brothers on the issue of traditional rituals which shows their emotional and practical nature. Sudhir and Anjali are very practical in their attitude as they find all these post-demise rituals as illogical and futile. But the Deshpande's continue to live with their false notion of status and honour and continue to spend money on the last rituals inspite of serious financial constraints.

Wada household is caught between extreme financial loss and desire to maintain its status. The towering ego of the male members of the Wada household and extreme money mindedness pushes the Wada towards thorough degeneration and ultimately things fall apart for the Deshpande family and finally they have to accept them. Every individual of the family has created a world of their own and the women hold the typical marginalized position. They have hardly anything to say in the family affairs.

Only once in the whole play the image of woman comes to the forefront when Vahini puts on all the traditional jewellery upon her and escapes into an imaginary world of self-admiration.

All this leads to further complications which highlights the plight of such traditional families which have stuck in time. The play written in 1983 captures vividly the decline of the Old Mansion/*wada* culture in Maharashtra, unable to stand the test of time and the social change in the world beyond. 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. Old Mansion/*wada* deals with a whole age; showing gently, if firmly the slow decline in the fortunes of a traditional Brahmin family, as it comes to terms with the demands of modernity. The play historicizes the transformation of the village, and relating it to present socio-economic and political contexts.

Though decline of feudalism and joint family culture seems to be the subject of this play at surface level, it focuses more on inner darkness of the human souls. Neither Bhaskar, Sudhir, Chandu, Prabha, Vahini and Anjali quarrel with one another. They are angry, disheartened but, don't have the courage to break the blood-ties. They think, there is no other option for them or, they have accepted, this is what life is. In the play, Dadi is seen often waiting for her end. As if she has given up her wish to live, she has nothing to do with the happenings in the mansion. She is just a human clock stopped working and lost its self. Symbolically it shows stopped time of the mansion as well. When the characters find nothing meaningful in their acts, they accept their inability and helplessness, perhaps, more than their fate. In this respect, the character of Prabha in the play could be seen. She is so eager to get out of the mansion, she says-

*Prabha: Let me get out of here, Aai. Please. This Mansion will devour me. I feel suffocated in the darkness of this place. Let me go to Amravati, Aai, please. (p. 45)*

Everything they do for their survival had to be done by the back door. One such instance from the play, when Sudhir asks Bhaskar about selling utensils of brass and copper, Bhaskar replies-



*Bhaskar: Do you think we were happy to sell the utensils? All of them carried the names of our grand- and great-grand parents but the times were such.*

*Sudhir: But you should have informed me.....*

*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.(p. 29)*

Old Stone Mansion /Wada Chirebandi explores decline and fall of a Deshpande family which symbolizes a lot many families who denied to change with the time in post-independent India. The play portrays the truth behind the walls of mansion (wada) and its decline, which is symbol of power, prosperity, prestige and dignity of family. Elkunchwar depicts the Deshpande family which is losing their hold over society due to financial constrains. The family cook, who is the third generation of cooks working for the Deshpande's, leaves the house to work at a restaurant at a bus stand. Bhaskar informs Sudhir that people in the village have started different kinds of business from liquor shop to brothels, but he cannot follow the same example. The family is not able to cope with the changing time. In 'Old Stone Mansion' Elkunchwar returned to the culture he had grown up with, that of Brahman *zameendars* in the Vidarbha countryside. It records the invasion of urban values and corrupt business practices into this feudal culture, destroying everything that resists change.

The play is full of unfortunate events for the Deshpande family. However, they are the victims of social pressure. They do not wish to work in farm and the labourers have stopped working on the lands of Brahmins because they have got their own lands after independence. The land reform acts by the government have benefitted the peasants. But the landlords declined in their financial position and social status. Similarly, the people in villages, particularly the non-Brahmins have started different kinds of shops in the village, irrespective of the nature of business. Some have started liquor shops as

well. The Brahmins have left the villages and a very few have left behind and they find it difficult to maintain their status and dignity without financial resources. This conflict of the Deshpande family is presented through integrating the symbol of mansion, tractor and Dadi as is symbol of time. The mansion is dilapidated due to lack of maintenance. The family does not afford to repair the mansion. It is very difficult for them to manage their daily expenses. They cannot live frugal life as they are the successors of the spendthrift Deshpande family. The mansion is the symbol of the glory of family but the presence of nibbling rats in mansion and its getting dilapidated implies the decline of the family. They have declined at financial and social levels as well.

Time is an important symbol working as motif throughout the play. Dadi is Time. She recurrently reminds all the other members of the family about time. Although she calls her dead son Venkatesha and hence belongs to past but she alerts all others about present and future. Past of the Deshpande's was prosperous but present is critical and future dark. Sudhir was the only person who escaped from the family troubles because he had left the mansion long ago and went Mumbai to do the job. The mansion engulfs those who remained attached to it. In fact it perishes them for being tied to it. Finally, Bhaskar has to sell the part of mansion to Bansilal and he demolishes it immediately.

Mahesh Elkunchwar uses the element of fantasy through the character of Vahini and Dadi. When Vahini wears the gold ornaments of the women of all generations of the Deshpande family, it becomes a surrealistic scene. The speech of Vahini is very lyrical and is repetition of Aai, who has expressed the same things about the ornaments of Deshpande women. Vahini's speech about the gold ornaments is full of fantasy:

*Vahini: (in a voice charged with emotion) Shall I tell you how I feel? I feel this is not just gold. It's something more. I sense all the Deshpande women standing around me gazing upon me admirably. Dadi's mother-in-law, Dadi, Aai... I feel their warm, affectionate touch upon me. How many have worn and guarded these ornaments! How*



*many hands and necks have adorned! One day my Parag's wife will wear them. She too will feel my loving touch...*

Dadi asking about time is the best example of fantasy in the play. Her crawling up to a tractor adds more to the fantasy of the play. Even Sudhir's memories about the past and the playing with Parag adds to the element of fantasy in the play.

Often there are comparisons between Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion* and Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and *Cherry Orchard*. Like Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Ranju wants to go Mumbai to make good career in film industry, Bollywood. In Chekhov's play, the three sisters could not manage to go to Moscow. However, Ranju manages to go Mumbai but gets cheated by her lover and loses everything including gold which is one of the last legacies of the Deshpande family. Bollywood, for most Indians is the substitute gratification of their unfulfilled desires. The romantic life of Bollywood is used as a matter of escape for Ranju in the play. Bored by the life style of the village Dharangaon, Ranju lives in the imaginary world of Bollywood singing the songs of Bollywood movies. But she realizes the futility of this glamorous world when she elopes with her lover and he deserts her in the style of a Bollywood story.

The play also emphasizes the theme of escapism through several characters. It is Ranju's wish to escape from Dharangaon and go to Mumbai. She is attracted by the glamorous life of Bollywood. But her escape from the village is a traumatic experience for her. Parag also wishes to escape from the village. He also becomes a drunkard to escape from the reality of his life. His wish to go for Mumbai is defeated. Abhay, his cousin, opposes his going there. Prabha desired long back to escape from the village. She wanted to go Amravati for higher education but her father didn't allow her to go. After her father's demise she plans to leave Dharangaon for higher education and settle in the city by selling her gold. But that plan is also thwarted when all the gold of the family is stolen by Ranju's tutor. Similarly, Chandu's desire to start a shop in village and escape from the family tradition is denied by his brother Bhaskar on the basis of family dignity and honour. Only Sudhir succeeds to escape from the life of

Dharangaon and he lives better life when compared to his brothers and sister. In short, those who have escaped from the shackles of family dignity and honour also escaped from the troubles and sorrows of the family.

Elkunchwar depicted Chandu as pathetic, mute, and dependent character. He does not have voice in the family. He works in the family as a servant and is not taken care of when injured by the tractor. Bhaskar and Sudhir are self-centred and think of their family only. Although Chandu's future is dark, he is ready to sell his four acre land to pay the debts of Bansilal. Chandu is also a victim of traditions and family lineage. He wanted to start a shop but not allowed by his brother Bhaskar because the business does not suit the family. These traditions and the ideas of family dignity destroys the dream of Chandu and finally he is left with his wounds and grief. The wound in his leg has become painful but he is not taken to hospital and Sudhir escapes from that responsibility as well. So Chandu's last cry 'Sudhir' is very pathetic and poignant.

To conclude, the old mansion or wada represents the traditional fabric of the society which is destroyed by the present time of modern democratic society where the relationships between the owner and the servant and caste hierarchy is challenged along with conventional respect for Brahmins. The political, economic and social freedom offered to masses after independence radically changed their sensibilities and made them aware of their existence which ultimately resulted into improved farming methods and starting new business like grocery, liquor and other shops denouncing the conventional Brahminical morality. On the contrary, the Brahmins could not adjust themselves with this new social order and hence they are thrown in to plight and troubles

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