

Block

3

MOHAN RAKESH: *HALFWAY HOUSE*

Block Introduction	105
UNIT 1	
<i>Halfway House: Reading the Text</i>	107
UNIT 2	
Middle Class Concerns	126
UNIT 3	
Women and Society	137
UNIT 4	
Dramatic Form	147

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In this block devoted to the study of Mohan Rakesh's major dramatic work *Halfway House* (originally published in Hindi under the title *Adhe Adhure*), we shall discuss the play in its various aspects and make clear to you its subtleties and intricacies. Our view is that a writer reflects his/her social surroundings in a particular way and aims to share one's perspective with a wide variety of readers and audiences. For communicating a specific vision of the world, the writer takes recourse to many methods and techniques that help concretize the artistic intent as also pose peculiar challenges and problems to the reader. There also lurk behind certain details and references the happenings of the writer's own life.

We have divided our discussion into four units.

Unit 1 takes you into the text of *Halfway House* to familiarise you with the plot and important situations in the play.

Unit 2 discusses the play as a representation of points of interest to the educated middle classes in India, telling you that the play is about Urban India.

Unit 3 analyzes *Halfway House* as a play about women's issues. The centre of discussion in this unit is the place of a woman in society under the determining influence of patriarchal issues.

Unit 4 underlines the importance of form in literature in general and *Halfway House* in particular. As we read the play, or imagine its presentation on the stage, we feel at a loss regarding the changing roles of single actor. Of course, this technique of representation makes a great deal of sense with respect to the complexity we encounter in real life in urban surroundings.

Happy reading!

UNIT 1 *HALFWAY HOUSE*: READING THE TEXT

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Early Life
- 1.3 The Importance of Arya Samaj in Early Twentieth Century
- 1.4 Emergence of New Issues in Independent India
- 1.5 Literary Writing in the Nineteen Fifties
- 1.6 Rise of the Middle Class
- 1.7 Evolution of Mohan Rakesh as a Major Literary Voice
 - 1.7.1 Literature in the Middle of New Socio-cultural Developments
- 1.8 Prologue
 - 1.8.1 Act One
 - 1.8.2 Act Two
- 1.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.10 Questions
- 1.11 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will read about the Hindi playwright Mohan Rakesh's biographical details with particular reference to his education and writing career. Equally importantly, you will also have a view of the times in which Mohan Rakesh lived and wrote. All these, in fact, are inseparably linked.

This unit offers a working summary of Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* and aims to introduce you to certain nuances of the text. The focus of this unit will be on:

- comprehending the relationship between actors and characters;
- analyzing situations and characters specifically;
- gaining awareness of the nature of social institutions;
- looking closely at the way the plot evolves; and
- locating the playwright's view on events and characters in the text.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

We should keep in mind that the surroundings of a writer play an important role in his/her growth and development. It is from these that a writer draws his/her inspiration to be active in the world s/he is born in. It applies in ample measure to Mohan Rakesh, a well-known Hindi writer of our times.

Halfway House follows a peculiar pattern. The audience gains entry into the play through a character called The Man. A little later, The Man becomes Savitri's husband and watches the goings on in the family helplessly. We shall understand the significance of this man's movements, responses and interventions in this unit.

1.2 EARLY LIFE



Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohan_Rakesh

Mohan Rakesh was born in an educated middle class family in Jalandhar, Punjab in 1925. He got his early schooling in the atmosphere of the famous Arya Samaj ethos. He learnt Hindi and Sanskrit simultaneously and became proficient in both languages. This brought him in touch with contemporary literature as well as classical Sanskrit texts that sharpened his intellect. His love for languages that would stand him in good stead later in life began with this early schooling. Equally significantly, the Arya Samaj movement gave him the required passion to pursue knowledge and look at things in rational terms. This also kept him free from that sentimentality which worked as a wall between social happenings and an individual's discerning eye. The peculiar sense of identity that Rakesh came to be known for in due course was forged in the nineteen twenties and thirties. He was also benefited by Jalandhar's closeness to Lahore, the educational and cultural centre of north India.

1.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF ARYA SAMAJ IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Arya Samaj swore by social reform and aimed to bring about a radical change in the outlook of the people. It was a major ideological presence in the Punjab of the day and ran schools and colleges in many towns of the province, notable among them being Lahore, Amritsar and Jalandhar. Education was an important means through which the mental horizon of the common masses could be widened and they were drawn into the process of understanding and changing their surroundings.

This reform movement encouraged discussion among educated sections about religious and social issues and a large number of Arya Samaj activists went about preaching the ideals and principles of Swami Dayanand Saraswati, its founder. Tirelessly, the preachers went from towns to villages and addressed gatherings. The main target of these preachers was the ritualistic orthodox Hindu Sanatan Dharma that promoted idol worship and observance of rules laid down by

Brahman priests in the temples. Activities of the Arya Samaj were taken as an affront by the followers of the orthodox Hindu religion and exchanges between the two resulted in violent clashes in many a case; the attack on rituals and idol worship had the potential to grow as a threat to the age-old 'wisdom' of the powerful group of Brahmins. Arya Samaj, on the other hand took its inspiration from the original teachings in the Vedas that accordingly to the adherents of this movement stood for truth and knowledge that any individual, man or woman could grasp.

The seminal book of Arya Samaj was 'Satyarth Prakash' ('The Light of Truth and Meaning') written by Swami Dayanand. Obviously, Mohan Rakesh would absorb the intellectual values of such a social movement and look at his world critically. This critical outlook became an essential ingredient of Rakesh's mental make-up. It has been said, however, that Arya Samaj was not the same in the nineteen thirties, the time of Rakesh's adolescence and mental growth, what it had initially – in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In fact, the formative years of Mohan Rakesh, the nineteen thirties bore influences of a totally different kind – this new era was marked by nationalist politics and socialist ideals. In the realm of ideology, too, a strong sense of materialism and atheism had set in. On reading Mohan Rakesh's major writings, we realize that the writer's focus is clearly on what he perceives around himself, the seemingly innocuous and ordinary developments in society. Still, these developments turn into his writings quite engaging and serious details that disturb and shock the reader. Thus, we are struck by sudden emergence of a phenomenon in the text that takes us deeply into the socio-economic scene of the times.

1.4 EMERGENCE OF NEW ISSUES IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

As a writer, Mohan Rakesh belongs to the post-Independence period when the country had entered a phase of what is known as nation-building after the era of subjugation to British colonial rule had ended. During the nineteen fifties, India was witness to adoption and implementation of progressive economic policies of constructing a strong industrial base; this went hand in hand with a constitutional system of governance based on free and fair elections. Till the nineteen forties, Indian people had been familiar only with instructions and orders from 'above', a euphemism for the privileged few who controlled India's socio-political life. Largely, these constituted the landed gentry and small-time rajahs who had enjoyed protection and patronage of the British till 1947.

Independence came to India's millions in the name of equality between man and woman who would be a significant part of social collectivity. Big plans were drawn up to open schools and colleges where education would be provided to the men and women of the country to integrate them into the social system as responsible citizens. Understandably, a great deal of fervour and excitement was generated in the new situation across the length and breadth of the country that had long lived by settled values and an entrenched code of behaviour. This was meaningfully combined with the idea of freedom: freedom to say what one wanted to say, join the stream of education one wished to join, move around confidently, set up a shop if job was not that one liked to do and adopt modern ways. The last

one, 'modern ways' was a window that presented immense possibilities. All this looks rather ordinary today, but in the fifties such a phenomenon was considered unthinkable by many.

Wasn't freedom of this kind somewhat abstract – unreal and lacking substance? It was difficult to challenge orthodoxy, moral beliefs and religious views. These things had shackled Indians for centuries and their grip over the masses was strong. In spite of the spread of education in the post-Independence era, the custom of purdah remained in towns and villages. In cities, too, most households stuck to keeping girls at home and training them to become efficient house-wives when marriage happened. Clash was bound to happen between the new ideas and old ways of life. Literature could not remain untouched by such issues that seemed to affect the day-to-day perceptions of people. In result, new stories, plot lines, plays and essays were written to take stock of the changing scene.

Another important question related to equality among classes, sections and regions as well as cities and villages. The question of gender equality also loomed large. These issues were raised by the Nationalist leaders in the first half of the twentieth century also, but in the changed scenario their meaning had changed. With no common enemy in sight to fight such as British imperialism, men and women in India were compelled to look inwards and transform themselves as equals in every way. Whereas the fight between high and low, rich and poor, men and women was of a political nature earlier, in the fifties it had turned socio-cultural.

1.5 LITERARY WRITING IN THE NINETEEN FIFTIES

The nineteen fifties had their peculiar impact on literature also. It was now supposed to shed its activist trait and become reflective. More and more writers came to believe that ideas were the domain of social sciences, not literature and that writers had to stop 'preaching' the right and desirable things. Writers of the old school were asked to rethink their earlier stand and accept the new reality. The word 'new' became a slogan, a guiding principle and a motto. There is no wonder that in the manner of New Criticism in Western Europe and America, Indian literature too began using such terms as New Writing, New Poetry, New Short Story, New Novel, etc. With the passage of time, antagonism between the new and the old became so pronounced that the contending sides refused to discuss cultural-literary matters patiently and democratically.

In the backdrop of these debates and differences stood the silent upheaval that affected the foundations of existence in India. Policies of progress and development that the Indian government adopted and implemented in the nineteen fifties touched villages and small towns as never before. Jobs in the cities attracted people from far and wide who would now live in different surroundings and cope with unfamiliar pressures. Most men came alone from their places to take jobs as their wives and children remained behind. They also had to compromise on the caste-related rituals and travel in buses and trains with unknown people. How could one be sure that the person sitting next to him was of a lower or upper caste? Women, too, had to partially shed purdah so that they could move around with ease. Stray cases of women joining office or school jobs brought them on a par with male clerks and teachers and created independent space of interaction.

Still further, the employed woman became a threat not just to her mother-in-law at home but also to her husband – the employed woman was no longer the dependent of the male or males. It was a mixed blessing – the woman with regular earning boosted the economic status of the family and yet her ability to be on her own changed the power equation in the family and neighbourhood.

1.6 RISE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The silent upheaval in the wake of rise of the middle class pressed ever so persistently against deep social prejudices, with bitterness being the result in the general environment. Of this, Pratibha Agrawal said this: “The new writing that emerged after Independence – of which Rakesh himself was an important part – primarily, of city-based, city-oriented, middle class writers. What one finds, therefore, in the writings of the last 35-40 years, in novels and stories, poems and plays are this middle-class environ and the city-circumscribed problems of this class. Today’s modern, middle-class man is wrapped up entirely in his own private problems. Personal happiness and sorrow, the forging of one’s identity as well as a personality, the establishment of new values, the new parameters of the man-woman relationship, the desire for personal freedom which, when too powerful, takes the shape of license, the apprehension of loneliness – the many question that modern man has to constantly face have also been the predominant concern of Hindi literature of the last forty years.” (‘Mohan Rakesh’, Mohan Rakesh, *Halfway House*, tr. Bindu Batra, Delhi: Worldview) This can work as an appropriate summing up of the point made above. Also mark the issues such as “middle-class environ”, “personal happiness”, “man-woman relationship”, “identity”, “loneliness”, etc. in this quotation. These indeed haunted the writers of the nineteen fifties and later.

G. P. Deshpande takes this issue to a theoretical level and says that “By the time independence came to India in 1947, modern drama as we knew then was deeply aware of the west and also of modernity. Inasmuch as it was a response to colonialism and imperialism, it was also a response to modernity, for colonialism and imperialism were ‘modern’ phenomena. With the arrival of political independence, we do not quite have post-colonial theatre. In fact the phenomenon of the ‘post-colonial’ made a lot of sense at least superficially. At another level it helped the thinking processes which wanted to announce the end of imperialism. The term ‘post-colonial’ is one of the many ‘post’ phrases which came into vogue following the failed student-uprising of 1968 (in France). From ‘Post-modernism’ to ‘Post-colonial’ seemed to suggest that the colonial was over and gone. ‘Post-colonial’ was and is a post-colonial category.” What Deshpande suggests here is that struggle in Indian life and ethos had shifted after Independence to an ideological plane and different global interests clashed with one another to sidestep the basic question of redefining India’s needs and requirements in an objective manner. Colonial phase had come to an end in the political sense but there was much that needed to be sorted out. Indian literature had to address questions that came with socioeconomic policies adopted by the new regime under a democratic constitutional framework. Rather than borrowing terms from cultural centres of the west, Indian drama in, particular, “seemed to celebrate,” says Deshpande, “the ‘Indian’ more than any other form of writing in India.” (Intro., *Modern Indian Drama*, New Delhi: Sahitya, 2000)

Take the phenomenon of the early years of post-Independence era as coinciding with the literary writer, an individual who lived at many levels: a householder, person with a job in the city, a sensitive observer of trends and an articulator of concrete responses; each position made him feel and think differently and the overall process left him confused, if not altogether disoriented and broken. Thus came up the need to redefine one's role as a writer in the given situation. It goes to Mohan Rakesh's credit that he remained ever eager to learn and evolve, seldom sticking to things that he may have held dear. The urge to experiment and tread new ground was innate to him who questioned what he saw and disagreed with the existing social norms. At the same time, the central figure in his writing was invariably a young man or woman who saw dreams and measured his circumstances against his long-cherished vision. This in course of time enabled him to reach a unified vision. We shall know about this vision in a separate unit of this block later.

1.7 EVOLUTION OF MOHAN RAKESH AS A MAJOR LITERARY VOICE

As an educated middle class individual, Mohan Rakesh went through different phases of evolution as a writer – observing happenings that would obstruct his plans, provide him options of success, compel him to leave his home town and live away from the near and dear ones. One such thing entailed teaching, first in a school in Shimla and later in the Hindi Department in Delhi University. The writer Rakesh came to be familiar at these places with the way literary texts were explained and interpreted for the benefit of students. The occasion also helped him look at the working of educational administration, rivalries among teachers as also ideas and paradigms that shaped sensibilities of middle class men and women. These found expression in Rakesh's fiction and plays. Particularly notable in this regards was his novel *Andhere Band Kamre* ('Dark, Closed Rooms') that had at its centre the growing sensibility of a sensitive individual in urban India. Since Rakesh was active simultaneously in the world of writing, he was able to watch the way writers and artists related to the environs of publication, distribution and appreciation of literary works.

Rakesh's specific participation in the world of letters began in the early nineteen sixties when he joined the famous monthly magazine, 'Sarika' as its editor. His dynamism was reflected not just in the selection of short stories for the magazine but also the regular columns that he introduced in it. One such column was 'Aaine Ke Samne' ('In Front of the Mirror') in which eminent writers of the day were approached to share with the reader their inner thoughts, predilections as well as literary strategies – how they wrote, what their aim was, which were the shaping influences in their lives, etc. Suddenly, the Hindi scene was transformed by this column that drew great attention of the reading public. Rakesh did not confine this column to the Hindi writers alone; he included famous writers from Urdu, too. In fact, the first writer to present his views and perception was none other than Rajinder Singh Bedi, a foremost Urdu writer of the day. Rakesh also took care to encourage young writers and treated with respect. This was the period when the issue of writer's identity and role in society emerged in a big way in the Hindi literary scene.

The magazine 'Sarika' was a sister publication of the Hindi weekly 'Dharmayug'. Both were published from Bombay under the banner of Bennett and Coleman Company that also owned such important national dailies as 'The Times of India' and 'Navbharat Times'. The fifties and sixties were the decades when literature was prominently highlighted in the print media. In fact, magazines and dailies published from big business houses such as the Bennett and Coleman Company faced a tough competition from a number of other Hindi magazines that came from other towns or cities such as Allahabad, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Delhi and Varanasi. All this is to suggest that the Hindi literary scene of the fifties and sixties in India was extremely vibrant and Rakesh got an opportunity to provide a character to the writing of the period through discussions and debates that he initiated in 'Sarika'. Writers of different age-groups and persuasions were given an opportunity to freely air their views and differ with one another. This was indeed in continuations with the tradition of analyses of literary-cultural trends that had begun in the days of Indian National Movement in the nineteen twenties when Premchand wrote and also edited magazines. Also come to mind in this context such eminent editors as Bhairav Prasad Gupt who energized the creative-artistic atmosphere in the nineteen fifties through magazines like 'Kahani' and 'Nai Kahaniyan'. Rakesh took things still further in the sixties. In the process, he emerged as a great experimenter and visionary.

Along with being a teacher in educational institutions and an editor of the short story magazine 'Sarika', Rakesh kept effectively intervening in the literary world with his short stories, novels, plays, translations of some Sanskrit classics into Hindi, each work, long or short, earning for him wide appreciation. A bit later in life, his travel account that was serialized under the title 'Akhiri Chattan Tak' ('Up to the Last Rock') became a constant reference in discussions for its stark prose, journey details, comments about his contemporaries as also descriptions of the many individual experiences he went through. People linked the many episodes in his works to his personal life. Rakesh's name was mentioned in many a relationship with women and there were times when interested commentators drew parallels between particular characters in his short stories, novels and plays and the individual women or men he had come in contact with. Rakesh also wrote pen-portraits of his writer-friends and on the other side, friends, too, unveiled many 'secrets' of his life. This happened in the nineteen sixties when the middle class of the Hindi region had effectively asserted itself in the world of writing. Rakesh and many writers of his time became carriers, so to say, of the self-centered, narrow and individualistic tendencies of North India's petty bourgeoisie. The tendencies in question took away literary writing from bigger social issues of the time – poverty, widening gap of inequality, exploitative acts of the rich and privileged, illiteracy, etc. Instead, a large chunk of Hindi writing of the period devoted itself to aspects such as individual disillusionment, self-alienation, the disintegrating family structure, identity, etc. Mohan Rakesh was in the middle of all this.

1.7.1 Literature in the Middle of New Socio-cultural Developments

I have not yet talked of the role of the emerging state vis-à-vis the writer. In the nineteen fifties, writing had become a relatively profitable proposition. One could publish, broadcast or present one's literary piece and get money as remuneration

from the magazine, newspaper, radio or the programme organizer. If the fame of the writer increased, he or she could win an award from a government or semi-government agency. There was now also a safe concept of writing for mass appeal that did not entail taking a firm stand against the powers that be, as was the case in the pre-Independence era. At the same time, the writer was worried about losing literary worth and power in his/ her writing through compromising on the standpoint, a risk that all writers face – their role in the objective sense being to reflect their times as faithfully as possible. Obviously, writing is not an ordinary activity providing to the writer a steady income. That successful writers make good money and also earn fame as well as status, they do so generally by paying the cost in terms of compromising on principles. Is writing a handmaid of the power structures or a voice that shook the reader out of complacency and helped him stand erect with pride? This question haunts a writer all the time and makes his venture a difficult one to pursue. Still, a middle class writer with a sense of playing safe and at the same time bringing important subjects in his writing indirectly can be a portrayer of the existing reality to some extent. What should also not be overlooked is that s/he can come out in an entirely new style in the course of composing a text. There always remains a gap between what one intends and what finally gets expressed. These different layers of literary representation come to surface when a reader confronts a work or a text. A complex phenomenon, literature is supposed to be handled with care and appropriate sympathy. The years after Independence raised these issues and many more in the literary-social sphere, with writers addressing them in their own specific ways.

1.8 PROLOGUE

The play *Halfway House* is divided into three parts: 1) Prologue; 2) Act I; and 3) Act II. The Prologue is an important part of the play which begins with it and also receives a specific direction from it. Let us see the role it plays in the structuring of *Halfway House*. We note that Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* is a play about a family going through difficult times and raises a number of issues relevant to the socio-cultural ethos of the time. The Prologue introduces the subject of the play: "a particular family and its particular circumstances". In the Prologue we meet "the man in a black suit" talking directly to the reader/spectator in the first person and making general observations on life. At this point, the man wearing a black suit is both an actor and a character who talks about the various roles he is going to play in the unfolding drama. In fact, he comes across first as an actor and then as a character of the play. He creates a link between the performers, the performance and the audience and for this reason is a figure similar to that of a sutradhar, the introducer of a play in traditional Indian drama. Apart from this role that this actor assumes in the prologue, he also enacts the characters of Mahendranath, Singhanian, Jagmohan and Juneja in the text. Indeed it is an innovative method in drama where one man plays four different roles; nevertheless it is not a mere technical point. In fact, Rakesh seems to make a comment here on human nature in that all men essentially are the same behind the different masks they wear.

The man in a black suit informs the reader/spectator that he does not have a well-defined role in this play. According to him the same is the case with other characters in the play. Clearly, he makes a statement here shunning the

expectations of the audience who would hope to see a play that is well-formed with a predetermined structure. The man further suggests that the play itself is “undefined”. He goes on to ask the existential question: “who am I?” To this, his answer is: “I am the man you bump into by chance in the street.” Commenting on the nature of the play he clearly tells us that “it is because of me that it (the play) does or does not evolve” and that he is responsible for all the happenings in the play. He explores alternative situations where the woman in the play could have had a different set of values, but later concludes that in any case the play would have remained as “undefined” than as it exists in the present state. Finally, he encourages the reader/spectator to give her/his suggestions on the problems raised in the play. Don’t you think that had the playwright offered a solution to the problems projected in the play, the plot and characters would have been appropriately defined? In answer, one may say that Rakesh consciously leaves characters, complex situations and issues midway/‘halfway’ as it were, without probing them further. This offers us some clue about the title of the play—*Halfway House*. This aspect is going to haunt us throughout this unit. Let us see how we confront it in the following discussion. First, we take up ‘Act One’ of the play and comprehend it from the point of view of marriage, family etc.

1.8.1 Act One

Marriage in the Post-Independence Context

The act opens with Savitri entering the living room, the place where the entire action takes place. The first impression one forms of her character is that she has a sense of self-assurance who knows her position in the house. In comparison, her husband is a beleaguered man. The moment Savitri enters the house, she either orders her husband around or complains of the reckless attitude of the household towards her. The setting of the room and the objects lying around tell us something about the characters who belong to the family. The pyjamas of “Bara Sahib” Mahendranath, Ashok’s magazine-clippings, and the torn books of Kinni give us a clear view of these characters. Angry with all of them, Savitri begins clearing the mess the members of the family made for she has invited her boss Singhanian over for tea to fix a job for her son Ashok. You should think why she has felt compelled to plan this visit of the boss. Her Husband, Mahendranath decides to leave the house on knowing about the invitation. We are told at this point that Mahendranath in the past borrowed money from his friend Juneja and that this money has to be paid now. Can Mahendranath pay the money to Juneja and be on equal terms with him? On his side, Mahendranath hopes that some help can come by associating with Juneja. Savitri, however, does not find Juneja trustworthy nor does she think he would ever be genuinely friendly towards her husband. One can see a clear lack of trust between the husband and wife. One can truly call it a kind of disconnect between Savitri and Mahendranath. In one of their many quarrels Mahendranath puts across a relevant question to Savitri: “Have you ever considered why I stay away?” The question remains unanswered as the reader/spectator struggles to find the answer with the hints available in the text.

Meanwhile, we are introduced to Binni the older girl in the family who eloped with and married Manoj. Binni regularly visits her parent’s home in a state of tension and unease. Unhappy in marriage, Binni helplessly tells her mother that

“before I got married I thought I knew Manoj very well. But now...” she feels that “the longer two people live together, breathe the same air,...the...the more estranged they become from one another” (16-17). Isn’t this because of the state of stagnation in the family?

We have two concrete instances of marriage—one that of Mahendranath and Savitri, and the other of Binni and Manoj—both of which point towards the failure of the institution itself, in which individuals find themselves becoming more and more alienated from their spouse but find it difficult to move out of the arrangement. It is for the reason that marriage comes along with a whole baggage of customs and laws ordained by society.

The Dimension of Family within Marriage

At the same time, there is a kind of mystery created around the house in which these characters live. Binni tells her parents that her husband feels uneasy in her parent’s home and that the “air” in the house has made them abnormal people. Binni can perhaps play a role in this situation: “I can find out only from within myself or from this house” the solution to the problem. That is why Binni keeps coming back to the house to find out the problem. Note that Manoj gets a mention in this conversation but never once appears in person. Here, Mohan Rakesh presents a perspective on the family of Mahendranath through an outsider, Manoj, but the playwright has carefully sifted the unimportant from the important in that he keeps the man offstage but presents his view of the family. This has made the situation complex.

We are next introduced to the younger girl in the family Kinni who after having returned from the school and finding no one in the house runs out in the street. Later, she finds that all the members in the family including her married sister Binni have come back. Where did they go and why didn’t they wait for her? She complains of having eaten nothing in school for want of money. Kinni’s state in the house is that of a neglected adolescent who craves for care and affection but gets none from the family. She turns into a rebellious girl with none in the family to confide in. She is bullied by her brother Ashok, too. It is a reflection on the home Kinni belongs to. One sympathizes with her in the play for more often than not she becomes a victim of other people’s bad temper. Kinni told her mother that she “feels so ashamed wearing torn socks to school” but Savitri evaded the problem. She keeps recounting the ways in which she’s humiliated in class by the teacher for not having brought the skeins of thread to school. In response, she gets scolding and threats. Indeed, Savitri is acutely aware of the problem but lacks sufficient means to meet the needs of the young girl. Savitri feels helpless and once says to her elder daughter: “I can’t manage any longer, Binni. I just can’t ...” (21-23). The audiences are left to wonder whether Savitri’s family is an isolated case or represents broader social trends in post-Independence India.

However, Ashok, the eldest among the three children of Mahendranath and Savitri, has no desire to take up a job particularly through help from social contacts of his mother. We are told that Ashok hasn’t shaved for days, is wearing old trousers, a worn-out but flashy shirt and that he has been sleeping in the house all day long. The image provided to us of Ashok here is that of an idler who scarcely feels responsible about matters relating the family. It is also given that Ashok had quit his college halfway and left in six weeks the job his mother arranged for

him. He is disrespectful to his parents, particularly his father in this scene which irks him no end. Consequently, Mahendranath has a bout of self-pity as he comments: "For how many years have I been bearing the burden of life? And for how many years have I been looking after this family? And despite that, what have I come to...that everyone answers me back, is rude, disrespectful, impertinent...I'm responsible for ruining my life, your (Savitri's) life, all your lives! And I still stick to this house, because I'm a parasite, because I like living off my wife" (26-27). The issue he has raised in this speech can scarcely be ignored. Irritated, he leaves the house at this moment deciding never to come back. Initially, he goes to his friend Juneja's place but returns home the next day.

Such interactions in the course of the play create tensions and build an unhealthy atmosphere; already the notion of family with principles that govern it has received a big jolt. It is not the ideal family that stands united in times of crisis nor are its members sympathetic towards one another. The image of a self-sacrificing mother is constantly denied to Savitri even when she iterates her claim to it. The values of love, compassion and respect that form the basis of the familial world are constantly done away with in the text from one situation to another. Does it suggest that family as an institution in the modern times is no more a secured zone that sustains the individual? Also, does the playwright focus upon a particular section of society, the upper-middle class where notions of family and fellow-feeling are increasingly receding to the background? Let us remind ourselves that Mahendranath's family is by no stretch of imagination an upper-middle class one; still it runs on the aspirations of economic success and the life of plenty. Indeed, it seems Mohan Rakesh has in mind the upper echelons of society when he projects the disintegration of a 'home' in *Halfway House*.

Next comes the announcement from Savitri that her boss Singhanian is about to reach their place. To this, Ashok reacts in the following manner: "If he hadn't been your boss, I would have booted him out that day. Lolling on the sofa and scratching himself in the groin. His thoughts stray in one direction, his eyes in another, and I'm supposed to guess that he's addressing me" (28-29). Ashok's description is indeed graphic; we actually witness Singhanian with his boastful look and pompous style. This bears reference to his comment: "What a wonderful publication...the Reader's Digest! In our country there's just trash; one never sees a good magazine. An American came here recently" (31). Singhanian's elitist pro-American approach has its basis in the class he belongs to. When Savitri entreats Singhanian to have tea, he responds thus: "No, not at all. The company has an international clientele, people from all countries visit our office. Recently, a Japanese delegation...whatever you may say, Japan is really keeping them all on their toes. Just the other day I glanced through the industrial statistics..." (31-32). Singhanian in the play is evidently upset about the way "labour unrest (is) sweeping through the country today" and more particularly the labour problem in his own firm. Although Singhanian appears only once in the play, the impact that his personality leaves on the reader/spectator is offensive. Mohan Rakesh makes a scathing attack on this particular section of Singhanians, suggesting that it is almost impossible to sympathise with such a lot. The audience is left to identify with Ashok's disgust of the man and the turmoil caused by his presence in the house. The act of squashing the insect played out by Ashok is in some sense a reference to what he'd like to do with Singhanian who is viewed by Ashok as an insect and a monster alternatively. We have also noted a sexual innuendo in

Singhanian's comment for Savitri: "Come to the house some day. You haven't been over for a long time" (35). It is evident that Singhanian would not help Savitri without extracting a price from her. As Singhanian leaves the house, Savitri chides Ashok for sketching a portrait of Singhanian as a monster:

THE WOMAN: Don't, if you can't but I won't stand for it. When I go out of my way to invite people, then you make fun of them. Did you hear? I'll never, never stand for it.

THE BOY: If you can't stand for it, why do you have to invite people who make...

THE WOMAN: Go on, tell me!

THE BOY: Let's change the subject. This is why I wanted to leave at the start.

THE WOMAN: Complete your sentence.

THE BOY: ...who make us feel even smaller than we actually are (40).

The argument ends with Savitri's decision that "from now on I'll only bother about myself...I have done my utmost. It's the end now as far as I'm concerned...it really is the end" (43). However, as things turn out to be later in the second act, there seems to be no end to quarrels and fault-finding among the family members, with Mahendranath and Savitri disagreeing on almost every point that is raised.

1.8.2 Act Two

Wishes and Expectations of the Middle-classes

The second act begins with clear indication of Savitri losing interest in the running of the house; she has not tidied the room on the following day. One expects significant changes to take place in this act with the feeling that things would finally move in a particular direction—perhaps the family would break gradually as each individual leaves the place and opts to live life on one's own terms. Binni's comment is significant: "She (Savitri) was so withdrawn last night...and this morning...I've never seen her like this before" the situation sets the mood of expectation that Savitri would change considerably and so would the circumstances.

Savitri's defiant appearance is a prelude to Mahendranath's decision of not coming back home and Juneja's plan to meet Savitri. It is evident that Mahendranath has been staying with Juneja all this while and the latter's visit to their house is in connection with the state of affairs that exist between Savitri and Mahendranath. At the same time, the focus shifts for a while on Binni. The following conversation between Ashok and Binni makes them both conscious of their lives in relation to the surroundings:

THE OLDER GIRL: How should I know? I feel like a stranger in this house now...

THE BOY: Didn't you ever feel like that before...?

THE OLDER GIRL: Before? Before, it was...

THE BOY: You didn't even know that you felt it. And when you became conscious of it you cleared out!

THE OLDER GIRL: Don't say that!

THE BOY: Why get upset? I feel the same...started feeling it from the day You left...

THE OLDER GIRL: What do you mean?

THE BOY: Perhaps I felt it before too...but I started thinking about it only when you'd gone.

THE OLDER GIRL: I ...don't understand...

THE BOY: There is something in this house that...

THE OLDER GIRL: (shattered) You think so too...? (46)

The sense of mystery created earlier in Act I with Binni telling Savitri that Manoj thinks she is not 'natural' gets re-established in this part of the play with Ashok's similar observations. What constitutes the unnatural element vis-à-vis the house remains a mystery till the very end. Nonetheless, such pointers spur the reader/spectator on to trace the clues in the text to what the issue is. The playwright makes use of the air of the house as a metaphor for the incomprehensible force governing the lives of the people in the house. Such instances add to the dramatic quality of the play. The device enables the playwright to express his concern for the incomprehensible layers of reality that are 'felt' but not 'seen'.

The focus in this part of the play further shifts away from Binni and Ashok towards Kinni who is dragged in from the street by Ashok and beaten up for talking with her friend Surekha about matters of sex, as this curiosity does not go well with her older brother, Ashok. Kinni on her side does not own up that she is in the wrong and this leads to another conflict in the house further on.

Meanwhile Savitri has decided to go out for tea with her long-standing friend Jagmohan with whom she has "something important to discuss". She says to Binni: "When you come next time I may not be here" (52). It seems that Savitri has finally resolved to move out of the house and give up her role of a wife and mother. The breaking of her necklace at this very moment symbolises the breaking of the family-ties she has held until now. The broken necklace leaves her upset but she goes to the cupboard to wear another one—which in turn suggests that Savitri has chosen another life for herself. Is this symbolism integral to the playwright's plan? As Savitri looks in the mirror she finds her hair growing grey, her eyes becoming more shadowy and suddenly finds Jagmohan behind looking silently at her from the door. He addresses Savitri—"Hello, Cuckoo"—from which we get an impression that Jagmohan has been an intimate friend of Savitri (here she calls him "Jog") and that the two have in fact been one-time lovers. This further gets substantiated with Savitri's commanding tone while speaking to him: "But I told you to come straight here, without wasting a moment" (54). The two share a kind of compatibility one expects Mahendranath and Savitri to share in matrimony. Her comment to Jagmohan "I know. I never misunderstand what you say" (55) is the case in point. This act in particular is significant in that each of Savitri's gestures and actions tell of a larger concern. Her feeling of losing

something important before going out with Jagmohan and her constant hesitation at finally leaving the house create this specific version of ev

Broader Aspects of Familial and Social Life

Interspersed with the main narrative we have the narratives of the three children of the house among whom Kinni's problems draw the attention of the reader. Here, the play opens up in a general way. The problems likewise that Binni and Ashok face are partly the result of their own doing. Binni could have avoided marrying Manoj and taken up a job instead, and Ashok too had the choice to earn his livelihood independently. But he would not take up a job that will ruin his self and he must save his individual being from being tainted by the corrupt social influences. Consider whether this could actually be the case or I am stretching the point. Kinni on the other hand seems more of a victim of choices taken by her elders. Put together, these individual acts reflect the general ethos of disintegration that causes angst: a sense of helplessness pressing upon one's psyche. As soon as Savitri leaves with Jagmohan, Kinni enters the house crying and on looking "around at the emptiness of the room" runs out. She has been chided by Surekha's mother who as Kinni tells Binni "says I'm ruining her daughter and other...horrid things about us..." (60). We realize that the concept of helpful, sympathetic neighbours gets inverted in the text and for some reason we are made to feel that the cause of it lies in the house run and controlled by Savitri and Mahendranath. Do you notice a sort of matriarchal structure entering the family as an economically independent woman has become a bread-winner in the family? This inversion of the patriarchal order inside the house as against the smooth working of it outside has created the rift between the family and the neighbours and it is for this reason that Surekha's mother thought that Kinni's entire family lacked moral values. Note that 'morality' as well as the accepted value system is produced by society in order to keep the individual within the bounds of general norms. Once a person flouts these norms, s/he is considered both immoral and threatening. Does it mean that the playwright Mohan Rakesh has taken a radical stand in presenting to us the framework of a matriarchal structure as an alternative to the existing one? The answer may be difficult to reach but we certainly are left to wonder. In consequence, our attention as readers and viewers shifts to the world outside the text.

The question of domestic violence is another important aspect of India's social life. There is a sharp reminder in the text of brutal wife-beating by Mahendranath. This is prior to the loss he incurred in his work and Savitri took upon her the responsibility of running the household. Binni in her conversation with Juneja tells him of this: "It's not a matter to be dismissed that lightly, Uncle! When I lived here it was like being...you can't even imagine what it was like...Daddy's rages when he tore Mama's clothes to shreds...when he gagged her and beat her up behind closed doors...dragging her by the hair to the WC...(shudders) I can't even recount the fearful scenes I've witnessed in this house!"(64). Our perception of Mahendranath also undergoes a change as the figure of a meek husband transforms into a ferocious animal. The conflict assumes new proportions as Savitri and Mahendranath are being analysed in their absence by the two close observers—Binni and Juneja. While Binni more or less defends her mother, Juneja is on the side of his friend Mahendranath.

Why does Juneja think it right for Mahendranath to leave Savitri? Why is Mahendranath bent on coming to the same house where he was humiliated and considered a non-entity? On this, Juneja is of the opinion that “Perhaps something can be done for a day. Or even for a week. But for ever? Nothing!” (65). In the case of Mahendranath, the house provides a sense of meaning to his existence which is why he has a strong urge to come back to it.

Soon we have Savitri back in the house facing Kinni who insists that Savitri meet Surekha’s mother. Savitri pays no heed to her and indeed hits her later for calling Binni a “lump of clay”. Is parental violence the answer to children’s queries and questionings in the house? Or is it that situations unfolding in the house point towards things happening elsewhere, in that environment of ruthlessness commerce and trade that seeks to swallow harmonious interaction between members in a family? Go over it and analyse matters further.

Feminist Questions and Concerns in *Halfway House*

The encounter between Savitri and Juneja turns out to be a bitter one in the text. Suspicions get established and secrets revealed as each blames the other for the wrongs done to the family; Juneja accuses Savitri for having Mahendranath “in a trap” so that “he has become incapable of doing anything for himself” (67) and Savitri tells him that Mahendranath has not proved to be a ‘man’. Should Savitri be blamed for her husband’s incapability? Mahendranath is the same man who subjected Savitri to violence, as if to take out on her his hidden frustrations. We are forced to ask from ourselves: how could the victim of violence put him in a trap? If Juneja’s view seems blinkered to us at this moment, we have to consider whether the playwright has too, a share in it.

Let us also take up the issue that Savitri has raised about Mahendranath: “Ever since I’ve known him, I’ve always found him leaning on someone or other. Particularly on you (Juneja). He’s never been able to do anything without asking you. If we want to buy something, he must ask you. If we want to go somewhere, he must ask you. When he wanted to marry me, he had to ask you. He can’t even breathe without asking you!” (68). According to Savitri, “the object of his existence is...as if...he were there only to fill in the gaps in the lives of others...whatever other people expect of him...or in whichever way they think they can use him” (69). Savitri has always been suspicious of Juneja for using Mahendranath and befooling him with regard to the money he owned and invested. She voices her opinion at this point to which Juneja’s reply is “Mahendranath was always a bit hasty” (69). Mark Juneja’s condescending tone in this remark. Savitri recounts her experiences in marriage when Mahendranath bullied his children and beat her up, how he wanted to “change the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I ...that same Mahendra who smiles meekly among his friends becomes a fiend when he comes home” (70). We witness here the kind of violence embedded in the very structure of marriage where the woman is at the receiving end; even when the man appears “meek” to the outside world, within the four walls of his house he becomes the oppressor. We admit that Rakesh gives ample space to the character of Savitri in the course of the text generally and particularly in this section, still he fails to do justice to her character by making her desire “a man” and not Mahendranath who is a weakling. Is it possible that Savitri apprehends the subordinate position of a woman in marriage and still believes

that her life would have been any different had she married a *man*? By insisting on having a 'man' in her life, a bold and self-assured husband, Savitri seems to have a superficial understanding of things around her, the moments of depth in her observations notwithstanding. For instance, would it not be appropriate if she wished for a life with a person who was her equal appreciated her for what she was?

In the lengthy dialogues and constant accusations between Savitri and Juneja, Binni is the silent observer; she stands in the same relationship to the other two characters as does the reader/spectator to all the characters. Initially, Savitri wishes Binni to listen to the entire conversation but later she asks Binni to leave and Juneja insists that she listen to the other side of the story. In Juneja's words:

But every other year you've tried to free yourself by looking around for another man! In the beginning I was one of these men. You say you respected me then. But what you think of me now...you have also just said. After me, you were enamoured of Shivjeet...his university degree, his trips abroad, or whatever. In reality he interested you only because...he was not Mahendra. But you were also quick to point out his faults. Why wasn't he frank? Why so much double-talk? Then you met Jagmohan. You admired him for his excellent contacts, his smart way of life, his generosity. But the real reason was the same; no matter what he was, he was Jagmohan...not Mahendra. Yet you began to find fault with him too...why he accepted even the harshest of words with a silent smile! It was a good thing he got transferred or...(73).

There are several questions that come to the fore at this point in the text. How does Juneja know so much about Savitri? He is Mahendranath's, not Savitri's friend. It is obvious that Mahendranath has shared these details with Juneja. Also, Mahendranath's views of Savitri and her associates have influenced Juneja's assessment of the same. In this sense, the above-quoted lines suggest the bias of a husband and his male friend. For them, interacting with other men in itself constitutes Savitri's crime. It is overlooked that like any individual, Savitri is bound to meet new people, make new friends and comment on people's behaviour. She is aware of her unsuccessful marriage and it is only natural that she would imagine a happy life with another man. Why is it expected that Savitri must find happiness with her husband? Let us recognise that both Mahendranath and Savitri are caught in the values of the upper-middle class given to self-seeking and individual progress. Juneja's harangue on her unaccepted behaviour is actually a sermon on how women should not forget their inferior and fragile position in the marital contract. Note this for instance "Because the meaning of life to you is how many different things you can have and enjoy at the same time. One man alone could never have given them to you, so no matter whom you married, you would always have felt as empty and as restless as you do today..." (74). Juneja meant it to be ironical but see how the remark reflects back on the class in society he belongs.

Juneja is aware of the events that have taken place in Savitri's life, and sure that Savitri tried to attract Manoj. The latter however, chose the daughter. Binni expresses her state of shock at this revelation, the first impact of which is one of disgust for Savitri. Instead, if we look into the matter closely we find that there is no response from Savitri on the matter which is why Juneja's argument gains

credence. Why is Savitri provided with no justification for this? Further, Juneja claims that after “Binni went away with Manoj you were in a frenzy. At times you nagged Mahendra, at others you lashed out at Ashok. And when you lost patience you made hysterical attempts to find a way to get out. Just then you heard that Jagmohan was back. Seeing all doors closed before you, you tried to step into the past” (75).

Juneja sums up her entire life in his comment with an air of authority. He is presumptuous to the extent that he claims to know what happened between Savitri and Jagmohan when they were out for tea. To quote:

You needn't tell me. I can tell you what happened. You said you were very unhappy. He said he sympathized. You said you wanted to leave this house. He said how fortunate it would have been if you'd come to this conclusion some years ago. You said what didn't take place then could take place now. He said he'd like it to, but there were too many obstacles...his position, your children, this and that. And then he wasn't happy in his job, he didn't know when he might quit, so he couldn't take such a step at this time. You listened in silence and kept wiping your tears. Eventually, he said you were getting late, he would take you home. You stood up quietly and got into the car. On the way, he perhaps mentioned that if you needed money he would... (76).

Note that it is only in the last line that Juneja adds a “perhaps” to his imaginative narrative, otherwise throughout his tale he is sure of what happened between Savitri and Jagmohan. In such circumstances is it justified on the part of the reader to believe Juneja word for word when we know that while Savitri was out for tea he was sitting in the house chatting with Binni? How is it then that we feel inclined to take Juneja's assumptions to be true? This is because, the playwright refuses to make his character of Savitri talk or give any kind of justification. One explanation for her silence could be that she feels put off by Juneja's allegations and therefore finds it useless to justifiably explain her conduct. Nonetheless, it finally appears that Savitri does not speak out of her guilt and there is little ambiguity regarding the matter for Rakesh seems to have projected in Juneja the voice of a sane man, going out of his way to help his friend while the real ‘devil’ is the woman. Juneja's assertion that Mahendranath is “attached to you (Savitri)” and helpless, makes one pity the man once again, thereby believing that the relentless Savitri has no attachment with her husband.

The play ends with Mahendranath's return to the house and it becomes clear that nothing is going to change in the life of any of the characters. This is in a way the anti-climax of the play for at the end of Act I and the beginning of Act II we were under the impression that things would change and move in a new direction, taking us perhaps to a new set of problematic. This, however, does not happen. Why? The playwright gave the background of the unchanging nature of circumstance in the Preface where an all-controlling figure of a single man plays many roles.

Certainly, Mohan Rakesh focuses upon the problems faced by the family but is unable to indicate for the benefit of the reader a direction in which answers could be found. The play seems static and the problems insurmountable. This version and representation of life remains predominant till the very end of the play.

The direction in which characters move or develop is determined by the writer's or text's perspective. The way characters unfold in the course of the play and project a specific trait that defines them in relation to other characters marks their development. Perspective draws together the different parts of a representation in such a way that the important and the superficial are clearly identified and separated. They are organized into a pattern so that together the contending viewpoints take us towards a meaningful resolution of issues. Mohan Rakesh's view of his times finds expression in *Halfway House* in that the family presented in the play is an ordinary family whose problems are those that the India of the time is faced with—the widening gap between the rich and the poor; the role of the middle class in such a scenario; the predicament of such a class along with the challenges it has to face; and the complex mechanism of the social system of the time. Individuals are changed by the forces in their environment and they too contribute to the change in their social surroundings.

1.9 LET US SUM UP

It is important to familiarize ourselves with a few significant details of Mohan Rakesh's life; these give us insights into his creative self as well as the concerns that he addressed in his writing. The same can be said of the times in which he lived. The socio-ideological scene in early twentieth century India left a lasting impact on Rakesh's mind and made him respond to the challenges with intense engagement. Consideration of questions arising from the broader relations in society greatly helps in understanding a writer. In the case of Mohan Rakesh, such a consideration is extremely valuable.

One can see a step-by-step growth of 'action' in *Halfway House* with special reference to the relationship between Mahendranath and Savitri under the structure of marriage and family. The text helps us understand the many layers of reality accompanying the middle-class life and concerns in post-Independence India.

1.10 QUESTIONS

1. To what extent did the Arya Samaj movement contribute to the evolution of rationalist discourse in early twentieth century writing?
2. Comment on the new literary trends in post-independence Hindi drama and fiction.
3. How did the rise of the middle class influence literary writing in the nineteen fifties? Explain.
4. What is the playwright's intention in making one actor play the characters of Mahendranath, Singhanian, Jagmohan and Juneja?
5. Critically analyse the character portrayal of Savitri in the play?
6. What is Mohan Rakesh's position on family, marriage and society in *Halfway House*?
7. Comment on the ending of *Halfway House*?

1.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Halfway House:
Reading the Text

Basu, Dilip Kumar, ed., Mohan Rakesh, *Halfway House*, (Delhi: Worldview), 1999.

Jain, Nemichandra, ed., *Mohan Rakesh Ke Sampooran Natak*, (Delhi: Rajpal), 2004.



UNIT 2 MIDDLE CLASS CONCERNS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Educated Middle Class and the Family
- 2.3 The Title *Halfway House*
- 2.4 The Crisis in the Play
- 2.5 The Characters in *Halfway House*
- 2.6 Culture and Society in *Halfway House*
 - 2.6.1 The Scope of Individual Freedom in *Halfway House*
 - 2.6.2 Male Dominance in *Halfway House*
 - 2.6.3 The Historical Context
 - 2.6.4 Conflicting Perspectives in *Halfway House*
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions
- 2.9 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

Our objective in this unit is to 1) familiarize you with a few important areas of Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* and 2) convey to you the central theme of the play.

In this unit, we shall discuss

- a) the economic problem the family in *Halfway House* faces;
- b) the crisis visible in the play;
- c) the impact of the economic crisis on the lives of Mahendranath, Savitri etc.;
- d) the socio-cultural context of the family in question; and
- e) the perspective that emerges in the play.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

I begin this discussion on Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* with a clear reference to its main character Mahendranath and his family. Here, the main point to be taken up is the deteriorating economic condition of the family in question. To share with you my responses to the play, I shall focus upon the specific moment of transition from a middle-class to a lower-middle-class set up in the body of the text. The next thing that follows is the problems that come along with such a condition in the lives of the characters. Along side I shall bring to your notice the important attributes of the middle-class in relation to the social system as a whole.

2.2 EDUCATED MIDDLE CLASS AND THE FAMILY

Halfway House has at its centre middle-class concerns which are marked by different kinds of constraints; the central among them being, as said above, financial pressure. Apparently, the play provides us with details of characters and their attitude towards life. We are witness to strained relationships as each character living in the house struggles to break free from familial ties. Nonetheless, they are all bound to the same house and keep returning to it. What is the compulsion that brings the characters together each time they are on the verge of leaving the family? More importantly, what has caused the disintegration of the family? Taking hints from the “broken furniture” and “limited space” in the play, we observe that we are dealing with a middle-class family pushed downwards, as it were, in the social hierarchy by certain hidden forces. At the same time, these hidden forces are active in creating conditions that work to the detriment of the middle-class. This results in a shift from the middle-class to lower middle-class lifestyle which creates problems for the members of the household, Mahendranath, Savitri, Binni, Ashok, and Kinni as they have to cope with the oppressive social organization.

Mohan Rakesh captures a phenomenon in which there is little scope for the small capitalist venture to make profit or for that matter thrive in competitive times. The family of Mahendranath is at the receiving end of this phenomenon.

As the middle-class family presented in the play comes to hard times, it is accompanied by turmoil in the lives of those who suffer the blow. An essential trait of the middle-class, too, comes to the fore, that of being cut off from the lower strata of society. It is also peculiar of the middle-class to look up to the upper-middle class to find favour there in the fond hope of becoming rich themselves. The inability to attain better standards of living or even maintaining one’s existing social position leaves the middle-class individual desperate to hold on to one’s fixed notions and ideas. This is because the dominant forces in society work upon the individual allowing little space to him/her in determining one’s own life.

2.3 THE TITLE *HALFWAY HOUSE*

Let’s see what the title of the play means to us. In the scenario mentioned above neither can the middle class individual gain admittance in the upper class nor can the person maintain one’s existing social position. Once social conditions are determined by historical necessities, we cannot move out of our social environment. In Mohan Rakesh’s scheme of things, there is little that an individual can do in such circumstances and there is also no possible way out. Hence, *Halfway House*. In fact, in the play, we have a house that is ‘halfway’ to its economic decline. The first line of the prologue substantiates the point— “A disorderly living room in what was once a fairly well-to-do middle-class home” (4). The transition from a well-to-do status to a “disorderly” one lies at the bottom of the crisis the entire family of Mahendranath is engulfed in. There is a stark difference between what the case *was* in the past and what it *is* in the present; this difference constantly pointed out in the play etches further the present state of affairs in the family. Certain minor instances in the text tell us

about the economic downturn of the family. At the very outset of the play, Savitri complains “A whole pot of tea for just one person” (8) and later “We wouldn’t even get the scraps we manage to eat on my salary” (14). The harsh reality finds expression in the younger girl, Kinni’s comment “If I’m hungry in school, I’ve no money to buy anything. And at home it takes hours to heat the milk” and “You (Savitri) said my hair-clips and socks would be here within a week—have you got them? I feel so ashamed wearing torn socks to school” (20-21). All the characters feel oppressed by the circumstances and feel helpless about the way things are for they are unable to move out of the constraints of social life. Also, their interaction with others makes the awareness of the financial pressure more acute.

2.4 THE CRISIS IN THE PLAY

In this section, I plan to particularly look into the causes and effects of the economic crisis faced by the family of Mahendranath. These are vitally linked to the kind of relationship the members of the family have and thus I would also analyze this very relationship vis-à-vis the text. Also, I would emphasize the responses and attitudes of characters towards the socio-economic condition they confront. These responses are to a large extent a product of the humiliation the family has to suffer in the midst of insecurities.

Everything in the text points to the economic crisis of the family and we face the question: What does the economic shift entail for Mahendranath’s family and what would happen if the characters lost their social standing? These questions haunt the characters living in the house and create a sense of fear in them leading them to desperate attempts to restore the little they can. When faced with difficult circumstances, the family begins to disintegrate as each of its members is caught in the web of compulsions and restraints emanating from society. Consider the way in which they interact with one another—Mahendranath complains, “everyone answers me back, is rude, disrespectful, impertinent” (26), Savitri questions, “If no one else is bothered, why should I alone go on?” (41), and Kinni, the younger girl almost becomes a hysterical case being stubborn, calling her older sister “a lump of clay” (65). Their behaviour lacks spontaneity and ease. Material lapse on the part of Mahendranath gives rise to emotional insecurities as each individual finds that she/he is alone, struggling in vain to fight against odds. Let me remind you here that the lapse I talk about is attributed in the play to Mahendranath by Savitri while the latter holds Savitri responsible for spending all the money. This leads to bickering. It is significant that none of the family members in the play has hopes of becoming comfortable economically. What do you think could be the reason? Suppose I said that the system under which they work is beyond their control, would you agree?

The material condition of the family forces the characters to act in particular ways; these clash mutually and stalemate is the result. Their responses are in some ways a rebellion against the norms that bind them. Take for instance, Ashok’s cutting pictures from magazines and tearing them all apart in frustration later. All characters in fact react very strongly to the situation they are caught up in, the first instance of which is to be found in the prologue. When the man in a black suit “stands up, as if to meet a challenge”; he fails to leave an impression

on the audience. Nonetheless, he raises the real issue vis-à-vis the play “Who or what has the determining role...I, the woman, the circumstances that surround us or the questions that arise out of our interaction with each other” (5-6). This question remains pertinent till the very end of the play as clashing perspectives of characters stand justified from their particular angles. This makes one wonder if these characters are really at fault. The other view could be that the social set-up of which they are a part is the real reason for their peculiar conditions.

Financial limitations lead to humiliation as each one in the family suffers the ghettoisation created by social hierarchy. What ghettoisation means here is that the family in question has been isolated from the larger community it once belonged to. People belonging to this class begin to consider Mahendranath and his family their inferior and let them understand that they no more hold rights and privileges they earlier had. Mahendranath, Savitri, Binni, Ashok, and Kinni have to accept this segregated mode of living.

2.5 THE CHARACTERS IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*

Let us take Mahendranath, Savitri and others as figures to be interpreted in the context in which they are placed. We notice **Mahendranath** becoming increasingly inconsequential in the house; he has lost respect with the loss of his fortune—“what is my status in this house? Silent acceptance, perpetual snubs, constant insults” (26). Economic dependence weakens his self-esteem as others in the house too view him as a burden. This is accompanied by a fear in him of being alone if and when his wife would leave him for being “dry rot in this house, eating away at its very foundations” (27). There is also some kind of emotional insecurity found in Mahendranath as he finds his wife giving importance to men having influence in society.

The economy of the house is inextricably linked with the world of trade and market in the society outside. This is to be particularly noted and understood. We are informed that Mahendranath had taken and spent his share of the money from the factory owned jointly by him and Juneja. While the latter is able to secure a comfortable position and lifestyle, Mahendranath remains without a job. We are also told later that Mahendranath is in debt and owes money to Juneja. Obviously, there is a suggestion that Juneja has deceived Mahendranath and misappropriated funds. It is significant how the market with its crass form of commercialism alters the personal relations of individuals. In the context of the play we witness the basic human values attached with friendship going down the drain. The role of the market in ruining personal relations needs to be stressed here. Ironically, Mahendranath finds Juneja his only companion. For this reason, Juneja assumes the role of a decision-maker in another man’s house. Mahendranath remains a meek petitioner as money borrowed from Juneja makes him completely submissive to the latter. This also enables Juneja to establish his superiority to Mahendranath. We have to grasp how the market has entered the domestic world and impinged on the daily lives of individuals.

However, **Savitri** does not view Juneja as a sympathizer of the family; she feels that he is the perpetrator of their troubles. What is your view? Don’t you think she understands the situation much better than her husband? She wants Mahendranath to understand it as well but in vain, as she comments in the text:

THE WOMAN : That's right! Keep hoping! He's just dying to help you! (starts dusting the furniture) There's always so much dust. Where does it come from?

THE FIRST MAN : You have no right to keep abusing him. He has always helped me.

THE WOMAN : We would have been better off, if he hadn't.

THE FIRST MAN : (sits down) Alright, I won't go! I don't go there to have a good time! If fate has been against me up to now...

THE WOMAN : Get up. Let me dust the sofa. (He stands up.) Sit down on that chair. (He sits down sulkily.) One can excuse what happened the first time. But what about the second time? Both Juneja and you invested equal amounts of money. There was one factory. The profit and loss occurred in the same factory. Yet, fate favoured him and not you?

THE FIRST MAN : (swallowing his anger with difficulty) If you had been a partner in the factory you'd have realized—

THE WOMAN: that I've already realised! Haven't I? (10)

Being the sole breadwinner of the house, Savitri has a rightful claim to the decision-making in the family. This becomes clear when we notice that she does not get the kind of importance she expects at home or actually gets at her workplace. One, she is cautious to maintain her profile at her workplace and two, she is eager to secure a job for her son even when the chances of his getting it are bleak. Her vain attempts exasperate her; she feels humiliated as neither do the businessmen she interacts with seem in earnest to help her nor do her family members—especially her husband and son—contribute to the family's well-being in any way. The behavior of her son Ashok before the guests she invites home distresses her. She is unhappy about the fact that Ashok has not accepted her idea of success and economic stability.

The anxiety that **Ashok** experiences on such occasions, is brought out in the text with full force. He suffers on account of having to bear with an unmannerly boss. Ashok finds he is incapable of doing a job that is not after his heart and despises the occasion when his mother invites 'influential' people at their house "who make us feel even smaller than we actually are" (40). He has a soft corner for his father—he tells Binni "Don't you pity him (Mahendranath) when you see what he's been reduced to?"—while his attitude towards his mother is somewhat ambiguous. This means that he dislikes Savitri's efforts of introducing him to people with considerable social standing and wishes her to do nothing about the state of the family—he retorts "If she can't manage, why does she continue to try?". Is he possessive about his mother and thinks that her meeting the visitor will reflect badly on the 'honour' of the household? Does he feel threatened that his mother is a working woman?

Binni on the other hand is unhappy in marriage and the source of her unhappiness is the broken house of her parents. Consequently, she keeps returning to the house to find out the problem that has led to a state of uneasiness in her after her

own marriage. She feels the ignominy of being a part of the family only when her husband debases her by claiming that “It’s from this house I have taken something with me which prevents me from being natural” (18). It remains a kind of mystery till the very end of the play as to what is it about the house that makes these characters ‘unnatural’. Obviously, it works as a metaphor to be deciphered by the reader/ spectator as the play unfolds. In the course of the text Binni “starts despising myself. I feel like...like smashing everything around me. Like defying him in a way that would...enrage him” (19). This assertion not only projects Binni’s humiliation but also her helplessness vis-à-vis the way things exist. When back in her parent’s house she tries hard to resolve the situation but she gets more and more entangled in it. Is it a fate-like pressure that she bears? Also, is there some link she has with the act of marriage?

Kinni the youngest in the family has her own set of troubles—she is an adolescent who requires care and affection from her in family in her formative years, the lack of which has an adverse impact on her mind. Kinni’s sorrows get intensified with the behavior of elders towards her and her problems. She has to bear the embarrassment of wearing torn socks to school and at home she remains unattended to, as the elders seem engrossed in their own worries. The level of normalcy is low to an extent in the family that there is sheer lack of tenderness and love among them. Instead things are violently thrown helter-skelter in the living room of the house. Note that Kinni in fact has to bear the aggression of others in the family as Ashok beats her up and Savitri slaps her and locks her up in the room. These incidents render her hysterical on many an occasion.

2.6 CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*

Having understood the precise nature of conditions of a family hard pressed for resources, I would analyze now a few of central issues in the context of the discussion of *Halfway House*. One, the relationship between the individual and society provides important clues vis-à-vis the text; two, the inter-relationship between the different classes present in society gives us an opportunity to understand comprehensively the nature and attitude of characters in the play; and three, the relationship among individuals who are a part of a given social structure and whose lives are determined by a shared tradition and culture helps us attain specific insights into the causes and effects of material changes in society. Looked at in this way, the entire phenomenon presented in the play becomes a subject of analysis. Let’s evolve a view on this in the following section.

2.6.1 The Scope of Individual Freedom in *Halfway House*

What kind of relationship exists between the individual and the society one inhabits? The individual is more or less dependent on society for his/her existence and development. However, the moment one becomes aware of this reality, even if partially, one begins to resist this dependence by deriving strength and solace from within one’s self. Of course, I am not saying that the individual is self-contained. The mind of the individual is full of social content and it is therefore almost impossible to dissociate one’s self from society and for this reason it becomes imperative for the individual to become involved in social affairs. Is it possible for the individual to move out of the given social formation? This is obviously not the case. At the same time, institutions and organizations built by

society over a period of time impact the sensibility of the individual thereby molding/altering one's mind. Indeed, institutions of education, family and religion, for example, play a decisive role in the development of the individual psyche. While these form the background of a literary work, the focal point in the text remains the individual as also his/her interaction with the environment.

In *Halfway House*, these concerns find concrete shape as the play foregrounds the struggle of characters from their specific positions. The characters in the play realize to some extent that their human significance and specific individuality cannot be seen in isolation. These cannot be separated from the context in which they were created. It is felt that their life is governed not by their personal will but by some external force which is abstract, yet it crushes their self-esteem, as it were. Hence, their recourse to one or another kind of escapism. For instance, Mahendranath avoids confronting the truth that he is an unsuccessful man who cannot sustain his family. This is why every time Savitri invites well-to-do male guests to the house Mahendranath finds some way to leave the place. He cannot entertain a guest who would make him conscious of his own ineptitude—the harsh reality of Mahendranath's life becomes starker when compared with another man's achievements. Ashok too manages to elude the circumstances by directing his thought towards idle work such as cutting pictures from magazines or drawing caricatures of people. The more he becomes aware of the limitations the more he feels oppressed by them and strives to divert his mind away from such thoughts. With this kind of realization he becomes guarded, defending himself against society as also against other members of the family. A sense of loneliness takes over his being making him drift away from social activities and social relations. Binni, too, evades the situation, whether knowingly or unknowingly, by running away from the house and marrying Manoj. Ashok claims "you didn't even know that you felt" like a stranger in the house "and when you became conscious of it you cleared out" is the case in point. That both Ashok and Binni feel like strangers in their own house corroborates the fact that the family has ceased to provide sustenance to the family members.

2.6.2 Male Dominance in *Halfway House*

We witness a host of characters, not a part of the family in *Halfway House*. These characters operate from their respective class within the social structure. Here it needs to be pointed out that Juneja, Singhanian and Jagmohan belong to the upper strata of society and their relation with the members of Mahendranath's family is one that exists between the privileged and the underprivileged. Note that Mahendranath and Savitri in their relationship with Juneja and Singhanian act as supplicants in need of some help. Even Jagmohan's attitude towards Savitri is somewhat sympathetic. In all these relations, the position of Mahendranath and Savitri is marked by helplessness. Juneja particularly plays a decisive role in the fate of the family as he takes upon himself the responsibility of setting things right between Mahendranath and Savitri. He has an authoritative presence in the house owing to his economic stature which gives him the right to speak about the internal affairs of the family. Singhanian, on his visits to the house, sits and lolls on the sofa as if the house were under his personal control. This gives him the right to lecture to Ashok on political rights and labor issues. He assumes a commanding tone in passing his judgment on Ashok "shiv shiv shiv! This violent attitude" and wears a conceited look recounting tales of his own success and

social prestige. Further, the following dialogue from the play explains to a large extent the relationship between Singhanian and Savitri:

THE WOMAN : I wonder if you've had the time to think about...?

THE SECOND MAN : (munching noisily) What?

THE WOMAN : That if ...that if you have a good job in view...

THE SECOND MAN : It's delicious!

THE WOMAN : You were kind enough to...

THE SECOND MAN : Yes, yes...you did mention something. For a cousin of yours...no, that was Mrs. Malhotra. Who was it you mentioned? (33)

The half broken sentences of Savitri point towards her hesitation to ask the favour but she has no choice. Singhanian on his side is least interested in the matter—his answer to Savitri's question about the job for Ashok is, "it's delicious". He constantly changes the topic and talks about his own achievements. Also, note that Savitri is perhaps not the only one bound by circumstances; there are others like her who seek favours from Singhanian such as Mrs. Malhotra mentioned in the conversation above as she too has been asking him to help her kinsmen. This gives credence to the argument that the family presented in the play is both peculiar and a type that represents a particular part of society at the time.

Nonetheless, there is an underlying tone of superiority in all the three men interacting with Mahendranath's family. It is significant that all members of the family face humiliation from the 'outsiders' who impress upon them the decline in their status. Whether it is Juneja, Singhanian, Jagmohan, Binni's husband Manoj, Kinni's school teacher or her friend Surekha's mother, all of them add to the agony of the family by making them not only conscious of their weak position but also miserable about their present state.

2.6.3 The Historical Context

Let us comprehend these instances in terms of the larger scenario of the time. What has caused this gap between Mahendranath's family and the outsiders who have moved up the social ladder? We have known by now that the economic shift of the family from middle to lower middle class status has led to this crisis. However, the historical context that gave rise to such a crisis in the Indian society of the 1960s is to be borne in mind. With the Indo-China war in 1962 and the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, a phase of 'disillusionment' had set in in the minds of the people at the time. We also find that India around this time was increasingly turning into a market-oriented society as Nehruvian socialism receded to the background. Private capital tended to become concentrated in the hands of a few as competition grew among entrepreneurs and industrialists, as technological development encouraged the formation of large units of production at the expense of the smaller ones. Mohan Rakesh seems to have broadly observed this particular phenomenon in *Halfway House*. This led to a crippling of certain segments to society. Mahendranath, Savitri and Binni seem to be overwhelmed by this logic of materialistic expansion—Ashok would try to make a place for himself among the rich. On her side, Savitri is bent on making social contacts with people who

have a strong influence in society. This mindset of hers gets passed on to those around her especially her children. Ashok is perhaps an exception in this case for he occasionally questions her way of thinking: “A man with a salary of five thousand. A chief commissioner. Whenever you’ve invited anyone, it hasn’t been for the person himself but...because of his name, his salary, his position” (40). Ashok’s outburst follows the episode of Singhanian’s visit to their house and the consequent conflict between Savitri and Ashok on the latter’s approach to the whole affair. Ashok mimics his mother’s boss and draws a monstrous picture of him which peeves Savitri no end. Savitri wishes him to take the matter seriously and respect the man for his position. The opportunistic approach reflected through the characters of Mahendranath and Savitri in particular point towards the predominance of profit-oriented values and the suppression of human-centered ones in the contemporary Indian milieu.

2.6.4 Conflicting Perspectives in *Halfway House*

We witness that schisms in the family finally gain centre-stage and it appears that the characters in the play are solitary beings who fail to connect with one another. Nonetheless, two things need mention here—the individual who finds himself in a state of isolation does so owing to certain concrete situations, and that individual solitariness is but a phase, one leading to a climax, and is in no way a universal human predicament. The tensed human relations presented in *Halfway House* are in this sense a product of specific changes occurring in the economic and social life of the family. There is a sense of an impending tragedy about to absorb the entire family as it were. This is why the attitudes of characters in the play at one level seem highly individualistic. However the attitude and behavioural pattern of characters must be seen as a response to the particular happening of the period.

At the same time, it is important to question—does the playwright idealize the isolation of the modern man or views it as a kind of deviation from normalcy? Mohan Rakesh views this isolation as a product of the social context and does not look up to such a condition as an ideal state of existence for human beings. It is evident in the text that while Savitri remains at her wit’s end to procure the lost social and economic stability for the family, Ashok seems determined to let things take their course and the house fall apart. For Ashok, the complicated transitory state of existence has a far more oppressive feel to it than the actual condition would be once the family disintegrates. For this reason he claims “High time the situation changed!” and “I want the whole business to be decided one way or the other” (45-46). Alternatively, Savitri keeps hoping that “somehow, something might come of it. If I try and keep up contacts with certain people, it’s not for my sake but for all of you! The burden of this house is so great that I need someone to share it with me. I can’t manage it alone!” (41). The contrasting attitudes of Savitri and Ashok towards the situation they are confronted with, cause a further flux in relations as both fail to see eye to eye with one another on issues that relate the family. For this reason, Ashok finds the word “home” inappropriate to describe their house. Insofar as Mahendranath is concerned, he too hopes to start a new business with Juneja thinking that his friend might help him in the long run but above all he is governed by the logic of fate working against him which

is why he finally leaves everything on destiny and passively waits for the outcome. In spite of all the insults heaped at him Mahendranath finds he is incapable of severing ties with his family and remains anxious about the lives of those around him. We are confronted with another question here—are these characters confined within the limits of their own experience which is why they fail to see the sufferings of others who are caught in the same situational web? In the text, it does not seem like Savitri understands Mahendranath or vice versa, yet they have stayed together for good twenty two years. As individuals they fail to enter a successful relationship. Perhaps, marriage and family act as binding forces that finally bring them together. If they could act according to their personal will they would have separated long ago but social institutions of marriage and family constrain individual freedom and impose its own laws on them. While these institutions restrain the individual by curbing his/her freedom, they simultaneously enable one to participate in the socio-cultural forces that govern the individual. This is why it is imperative that we view the relationship between individual and society dialectically in that the characters are not confined to their personal space but act as agents capable of making/altering the state of things in society. We find that in *Halfway House* the characters' put up a fight against the dominant forces in society but whether they become active agents participating in and thereby changing the social order is an area open for discussion.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

The role of the middle-class in the changing social systems is important in the play. Also, the reactions and responses of the inhabitants of the house projected in the play should be viewed as product of the socio-historical predicament the characters are faced with. For Mohan Rakesh, the oppressive nature of social forces is felt even in the domestic world and that it contributes to the destruction of the familial space. Individuals become the meeting point of these forces active in society and their inability to work in tandem with the social norms gives rise to decentred sensibilities. The play in this sense does not evolve into a climax, the whole action in fact constitutes the climactic moment when the above mentioned forces impinge on individual lives. In *Halfway House* we also witness the enormity of circumstances but not the agency of the collective human force that fights against it. Finally, the family of Mahendranath has been placed in this nexus to understand the ways in which the play offers a critique of the social life of the 60s and 70s.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. In what way is the play *Halfway House* a comment on the present times of the 1960s?
2. What are the central issues projected by Mohan Rakesh in the play?
3. How does the middle-class family presented in *Halfway House* cope with the socio-economic problems it faces?
4. Comment on the clash of different perspectives in *Halfway House*?

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 3 WOMEN AND SOCIETY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Issue of Domestic Harmony in Mohan Rakesh's Writing
- 3.3 Disintegrating Family as a Major Theme in Post-Independence Writing
- 3.4 How is the Man-Woman Question Presented in *Halfway House*?
- 3.5 Social Dimension of Conflicting Values and Principles
- 3.6 The Woman's Perspective in *Halfway House*
- 3.7 The Male as a Victim of Society of his Time
- 3.8 Viewing Possibilities of an Alternative Paradigm
- 3.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.10 Questions
- 3.11 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall consider at length the issue of women's representation in Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* with particular reference to family, neighbourhood and the broader market-oriented world where women bear the burden of oppression at physical and mental levels.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We have read in the earlier units that *Halfway House* is a play that deals with the clash between a man as the master of the household and his wife who is the sole breadwinner in the family. Their respective positions in such a context generate peculiar pressures: Husband Mahendranath feels helpless since he cannot confidently communicate with wife Savitri, and conversely, the wife fails to understand why Mahendranath is so weak from inside that he has to lean again and again on his friend Juneja. The reasons for their peculiar behaviour go far in the direction of the society that assigned gender roles to them – to the man as the strong guiding partner in marriage and to the woman as the weak life-companion expected to confine herself to the home. The ensuing complexity of their relationship is at the heart of this play as we shall see in the following discussion. At first, we take the principle of domestic harmony that each woman in an Indian household is supposed to strive for. This will also give us an occasion to see whether this aspect was in focus in drama alone or it traversed other literary genres, too.

3.2 ISSUE OF DOMESTIC HARMONY IN MOHAN RAKESH'S WRITING

Even though Mohan Rakesh had started writing plays quite early in life (his first play 'Ashadh Ka Ek Din' was conceived and partially composed in the nineteen

fifties), he got recognition as a dramatist only in the late nineteen sixties when popularity came his way through the staging of his third play *Adhe Adhure* translated in English as *Halfway House*. Immediately after the production of this play in 1969, Rakesh became a phenomenon to reckon with in Hindi and a familiar name in the Indian theatre in general. The play was hailed as a masterpiece that indeed brought to centre-stage the issue of middle class existence in post-Independence India. Not exactly forward-looking or 'progressive' in its treatment of the marriage and the home, the play drew notice for its peculiar 'realism' that made the audience sit up and rethink their attitude to relationships within the four walls of the household. In the situation, the boundary of the household seemed not to protect the occupants from the social gaze but became an oppressive agency that worked to the detriment of the weak under its discipline. The people within the household felt anguished but lacked the means to effectively voice their grievance. They assigned no significance to their lot in the overall context of larger social happenings, for reasons that we shall take up in the following discussion. The same aspect of life (linked with the urban middle class) was represented with a keen sense of realism and urgency in Hindi short fiction. We have to keep in mind that Mohan Rakesh had been recognized till the nineteen fifties mainly as a writer of short stories.

3.3 DISINTEGRATING FAMILY AS A MAJOR THEME IN POST-INDEPENDENCE WRITING

The question of strains and difficulties in the family was nothing new to the Hindi short fiction of the nineteen fifties. Short stories dealt with such problems quite seriously and engaged with the increasing disillusionment in life with sensitivity. It had dawned on the writers of the period that the feeling of unease and disquiet in the nineteen fifties had resulted from the inept handling of economic policies and dilutions that India's privileged sections had made of moral and ethical principles with a view to furthering their narrow interests. The weakened idealism of post-Independence India caused a sense of uncertainty and unease in the writers of the day who still looked for inspiration towards the glorious fight the country had given to British imperialism. New developments marked by tough competition and individual progress, however, dampened the spirit of self-sacrifice and collective functioning and made ordinary people wonder whether all was right with the world, so to say. Impact of the said disillusionment could be seen on the life in a joint family that scarcely met the demands of the upwardly mobile middle class.

What struck the depiction of the same theme in theatre was the dramatic presentation of 'ordinary' aspects of life – the drudgery of the home with its day-to-day miseries. It appeared as if the dramatist had held a mirror up to the Indian middle class, literally – the 'ordinary' in life shocked when seen actually happening on the stage that in turn distanced and 'objectified' the mundane. In *Halfway House*, the middle class in India suddenly became an important site upon which larger battles of ideology and socio-economic living were fought. Here, we encounter, for instance, the man-woman clash not merely at the level of ego or temperament but as crucial changes in equation between individuals; the equation in question had a great deal to do with paradigms that unfolded in

the post-imperialist phase of Indian society. This last question would be taken up at length in Unit 5 of this block.

3.4 HOW IS THE MAN-WOMAN QUESTION PRESENTED IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*?

Let us go a bit deeper into the text of *Halfway House*. In this play, Mohan Rakesh has given a good deal of space to the central woman character Savitri. The space has enabled her to articulate her dilemma whether to run her 'house' in its present form or altogether leave it to move from there to an alternative 'home.' Wouldn't the latter decision mean that she is abdicating responsibility towards her husband and the two young children who share this house with her, whereas the third got married but eventually came back to stay with her parents? More importantly, is Savitri in a position to settle down elsewhere with another man? Her bearing the burden of responsibility has two aspects to it: one, being the bread-winner, she feeds people in the household; two, she is a woman because of which fact she has the additional role of keeping things together in the house she inhabits.

It would be in order to have a close look at the way the *Adhe Adhure* was interpreted in the initial stages of its production. The Hindi title was translated as *Halfway House* in English by Bindu Batra who was not only Mohan Rakesh's contemporary but his close associate (1). She was in constant touch with Rakesh in the course of translating the play. This suggests that Rakesh accepted the English title and 'saw' the point made by the translator through the interpretive word *Halfway House*. That is the way the play appeals to almost every reader who appreciates it as an account of the disintegration of the institution of the family in post-Independence India – the play is about the family of Mahendranath and wife Savitri. Whatever Rakesh meant by *Adhe Adhure* in Hindi, he made peace with the idea that the play was substantially about a couple who were not able to live together with comfort under one roof.

The play represents the reality of life in India in the nineteen fifties and reflects the changed social circumstance at the time. Significantly, the traditional mode of the husband active in the outside world and the wife performing the dull mechanical job of running the house is partly reversed in *Adhe Adhure*. More specifically, the two are exposed to the outside pressures of the day in an equal measure. In fact, the seemingly easy arrangement of dividing the human labour into the 'outside' and 'inside' activity had for centuries subjected the female population to passive servility in the four walls of home. The jolt received by the society of post-Independence India with women enjoying parity with men on the strength of education and job that made them an equal participant in social life was indeed severe. Men of that generation felt torn between the principle of equality in life on the one hand and social orthodoxy that subtly worked on the minds of people through the existing patriarchal system on the other – disintegration of the family had a lot to do with this development.

3.5 SOCIAL DIMENSION OF CONFLICTING VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

Let us take up the critical comment made by eminent theatre person and scholar Sanjay Kumar in the context of the perspective that Rakesh gets to project in the

course of the play. To quote: “In its analysis of contemporary society, the play shows a worrying lack of dynamism. Showing a circularity in its ideational movement – a halfway house and its unfinished, incomplete inhabitants, the play rules out the possibility of any kind of collective approach to move out of the mire. Even at the personal, existential level, its characters are in a cul-de-sac and the final message of the play can be one of replicating neo-modernist endorsement of existent structures” (H.H., ed., D. Basu, 134). The comment provides us an entry point to the text that ostensibly seeks to do justice to the situation in which the female protagonist Savitri is placed. We note the institution of the family, for instance, entering a phase of crisis in post-Independence India also got strongly linked up with the emerging system of economic growth and expansion. For an observer of society such as Rakesh, this may have meant rise of individuals on the economic scale merely – a simplistic conclusion but nonetheless ‘real’. If patriarchy pulled men towards rejection of the new ethos and self-assertion as the way to counter women, the tempting ideal of affluence and good living made individual males send their women to schools, government offices, hospitals, etc. as salary-earning staff. The income accruing to the family from women doing jobs made a substantial difference to what was considered the standard of living of the family. This process had been captured to a certain extent in Hindi fiction, but it still remained to be forcefully represented on the stage through drama. Mohan Rakesh seriously engaged with this phenomenon in *Halfway House* where the husband Mahendranath realistically typifies such a male – he doesn’t mind the money but rues that the wife has to go to the office to earn it. Modernity and patriarchy run counter to each other and place the male in a state of dilemma.

There is a peculiar socio-moral dimension to this phenomenon as Mahendranath sees it: he is haunted by the gnawing thought that he is prostituting his wife for gaining a foothold in the respectable world. Here, the typical male psyche is at work which is visited by the ethical unease that the woman provides economic upliftment to the family – the obvious end result of this would be a sense of insecurity in the male. More than middle class, this idea is ingrained in the ethos of capitalism where the appearance of success is more important than success itself. Thus, quality and status in the upper circle assume attractive proportions of wealth that would in the long run multiply itself and become still more valuable – a cycle that would take individual players in its grip and drive them by its own dynamic.

However, Mahendranath does not know the way in which the dilemma of climbing up in social hierarchy and at the same time protecting one’s sense of ‘dignity’ can be resolved. It is not a capitalist family per se (business partnership, negotiations, cold discussions on who gains and who loses, etc.), even as the male protagonist has many a time thought of investing in a business venture. We have on the one side the ambitious male unable to succeed in a business venture and on the other a self-respecting husband drawn backwards to stress the humanist principle of selfhood and dignity. The irony, however, is that the other members of the family, the son and two daughters, do not link their parents with attributes of identity and self-respect; instead they behave as critical bystanders when things hot up in the household. They have the grievance that protection, harmony and peace have always remained away the environs of the household. Add to this the

fact that they have their own small matters to think of where the parents have little role to play, the Mahendranath-Savitri duo stuck through bickering with each other and having no time for the kids. In this sense, the play is indeed about existential efforts of a male to achieve comfort and importance in life and rise in self-esteem. He would brood, look helplessly around since there is no alternative in sight and feel important as a victim. At the same time, however, he lacks the 'manly' capacity to successfully negotiate the world that is wedded to climbing high irrespective of the cost involved in doing so. Clearly, the whole perspective is male-centered. Thus, Savitri's attitude to the existing pressures would have to be defined from a different angle.

3.6 THE WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*

Halfway House could be seen as an endeavour to examine and critique, albeit narrowly, a woman's struggle to assert in face of circumstances that males alone drive and control. It can be said that the paradox surrounding the male is inextricably tied up in *Halfway House* with the potential effort by a woman to express her mind in the situation of a family. In fact, the key word of the dramatic representation in the play is 'situation' that does its disciplining act at the expense of Savitri. Examples of this being a situation are many: the husband in the family wished to make money through a business venture and failed in the plan; the male ego of the husband was damaged in the long process of the failure; the superficially liberal atmosphere of the household led the children to take to anarchic behaviour; the woman in the house, being educated and qualified to work in an office to earn money, flouted the existing norm of remaining stuck to home; the woman protagonist came in contact with men in the outside world and became an object of exploitation at their hands, as she also dreamed of breaking free from the shackles of the family to live independently, etc. All these constitute what have called 'situation' that is given, unmoving and oppressive in the body of the play. Please remember that the male protagonist is confused, sad and answerless in the beginning of the play, the same way he is seen entering the house at the end of the play. In this closed world, Savitri is allowed to quietly dream, feel irritated, become concerned about the future of kids, as also be of help to her husband caught in the dilemma of what can be charitably called modern living. The brunt of the situation is borne obviously by the female protagonist.

Let us consider the married woman's interpretation of the aforementioned situation from a slightly different angle. The wife Savitri married Mahendranath as much for liking him from a distance (this is what courtship before marriage meant in India in the nineteen fifties) as for seeing him in terms of an equal partner in life. Under the binding values of patriarchy, this included the perennial worry of a woman that her husband may not belong to her in the sense in which she belonged to him, entirely and exclusively. Whereas the female leaves her home and hearth as well as all those who 'related' to her really closely, the male owns and controls that territory to which the woman goes and which she occupies as a subordinate. This would sound quite simple at present but at the time Mohan Rakesh wrote the play, the situation would leave an upwardly mobile woman deeply anguished. She felt truly threatened that the husband quite acceptably moved around in

male company where he observed gentle and cultured ways since the circle consisted of equals but turned different vis-à-vis the wife at home. Was he at fault for doing so? The educated woman of the nineteen fifties would think this to be the case. On being called Mahendranath's wife by her husband's friend, this is how Savitri articulates her serious grievance to him. I quote the speech in more or less its entirety:

Don't call me that [a wife] – Mahendra is also a man, with a family ... a fact that those who were close to him never liked from the start. By getting married he almost seemed to have snatched something away from you, 'Mahendra no longer laughs as he used to' ... 'He's no longer the Mahendra he used to be!' ... And Mahendra's life-struggle has been to somehow remain what he used to be. So that no one would be able to say that he has changed. That is why he's so frustrated – bangs his head against the wall – bullies the children – beats up his wife ...! His friends need him to pass their leisure hours. No party is right without Mahendra. No picnic is fun without Mahendra. His main job is to keep his friends happy. And not only is it *his* main job, but I should also be the only concern of his family. 'How can you refuse to go there?' ... 'You think you're an educated woman' ... 'You don't even know how to behave!' He wants to change the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I ... That same Mahendra who smiles meekly among his friends when he comes home. One never knows when he may scratch one's eyes out or drink one's life-blood! One day he makes a bonfire of his clothes in anger. Another day he sits on my chest and bangs my head against the floor. 'Tell me whether you'll come with me or not? Whether you'll do all I say or not?' But I still don't do what he wants. I still don't conform. I hate all this – I hate it. I want ... a man, not just a miserable ... hanger-on! Sometimes I try to wrench my tortured being away from him. There was even a time when I tried to turn to him into a man. But if my efforts ever began to bear fruit, his friends started pitying him. 'Savitri is leading Mahendra by the nose!' 'Savitri has broken him ... he is no longer a man.' Just a puppet ... Poor Mahendra! (The emphasis and the gaps are in the original). (2)

This speech is important on two counts – one, it is apparently made by the female protagonist and thus presents her point-of-view; two, conversely, it betrays the male construction through the mimicry that is inherent in the representation. In fact, the two are so well-joined in its final form that the speech becomes a multi-layered account of the situation we intend to analyze.

In this quotation, why does Savitri initially resist being called the 'wife'? Is it that she dreamt of a special home from where she would actively engage with the world she is born in and where she would have a place of her own? If we take that to be the truth, Savitri accepts the fact of patriarchy and considers the institution to be friendly to her interests as a woman. Being a wife in this sense is not as significant as being a part of the social establishment consisting of husband, children and neighbours with whom she would have fulfilling relations. Her being possessive about Mahendranath also reveals this aspect of her understanding of the world. She seems to be competing with her husband's friends for gaining control over him – how she wishes he would remain away from the friends and be in his company 'smiling' as 'meekly' as he does with others! To a great extent, Savitri is out and out a patriarchal soul, accepting the given arrangement and

pursuing her path of gaining control over the household including the husband. That is why she is bitter with Mahendranath's friends, they come in the way of her effort to capture the house to run it after her heart. This perspective, ironically, works to the detriment of Savitri's own interests as a person and citizen. The ethic of the home to which she subscribes more or less entirely would enslave her being and impose on her the role of wife, or the woman of the house. She would not have realized this issue but for the fact that she works for a living in the office – representing the outside world that bears the stamp of equality among co-workers. Relative independence at the place of work is enjoyable and appealing; it gives Savitri a different sense of fulfillment, modern as well as creatively satisfying. The distinctive feature of this fulfillment is individual gain. Savitri herself creates points of opportunity to meet colleagues and see them for what they are. Her alliance with Jagmohan being of a piece with it, she fantasizes to move to his place and walk free from the family she left behind in the morning. Is it objectionable? Patriarchal gaze would certainly find it unacceptable and bring in questions of loyalty, commitment, duty, etc. These, as is known, drive the family institution and expect the woman to adhere to them. If we look closely at the speech quoted above, we would see clear hints of this complex working of patriarchy in the background of Savitri's utterances. Thus, patriarchy puts Savitri in the dock in spite of the fact that she herself articulates her grievance to Mahendranath in this speech.

One could also note a streak in Mahendranath to make his wife conform to what he considers the right kind of behaviour. Savitri quotes her husband saying, "You think you are an educated woman? ... you don't know how to behave ...". This way, the situation compels him to become a carrier of the views and preferences of his male friends. The woman in Savitri cannot easily take this since she asserts the right to be what she is. Her resistance to Mahendranath's effort at making her behave in true manner of an educated woman fails since she chooses to reject a conformist code. This turns the husband violent. Isn't such violence indicative of a hidden male agenda under which the woman is denied the right to run her life inside the family the way she wants? It would come particularly heavily on a woman who works outside the home.

But how could she imagine matrimony to be the agency that would be partial to her and open out to her individual fancies? This question is relevant keeping in view the above discussion about the occasions that her job creates for her individual freedom. As suggested, Savitri has failed to grasp the essence of matrimony as a full-scale package, a contract in which not just the male (husband) is to call the shots but the whole lot of males supporting the primary male (husband again) are to actively assert themselves as the patriarchal authority ("By getting married he almost seemed to have snatched something away from you", says Savitri). Thus, getting married for Savitri is to associate herself with the husband and his friends from the subordinate position of an outsider who appeared on the scene on terms set by the already established structure of the family. Isn't she a 'refugee' in Mahendranath's home? This is one side of Savitri's problem. Another is that her husband, her partner in marriage is also subject to the rules governing the larger world. Is there a point where the husband-wife duo could meet and see prospects of a joint struggle against a common enemy? We shall see this aspect in the next part of the analysis.

3.7 THE MALE AS A VICTIM OF SOCIETY OF HIS TIME

It is difficult to also overlook the fact that Mahendranath is frustrated not as much in marriage as in the competitive ethos that prevails outside the home. How would Savitri cope with this aspect of the society of which she is an important (productive) member? She has a stake in the running of her world as an employee. In this sense, that world of which Mahendranath feels to be the victim has entered the portals of this house through his own wife Savitri. He has to bear the brunt of competition from his own wife. She is sanctified by a renewed patriarchy unless the present social systems fought it consciously. Even as she is a subordinate partner in the matrimonial arrangement, Mahendranath cannot subdue her in his own home. With no settled job or a regular source of income, he is bound to play second fiddle to her. The irony is compounded this time by Savitri who now wishes that Mahendranath make a grade in the world and let her have all those comforts enjoyed by successful people. Her grouse with this husband is that he is not a man but a hanger-on (“I want ... I want a man, not just a miserable ... hanger-on!”). She also has this feeling of her own failure in the case because of which she says self-pityingly that “There was even a time when I tried to turn him into a man.” The speech in its totality presents the family as a hostile formation of which Savitri is a helpless victim in spite of her best efforts to turn it into an instrument used by her to promote her narrow interests. The irony persists that the speech that began with “Don’t call me that [a wife]” ends with “Just a puppet ... poor Mahendra!” The two could perhaps sympathize with each other and together look critically at their surroundings. There would be a chance here to bridge the male-female divide and place the husband and wife together against bigger forces at work outside the home. Let us not forget that Mahendranath has lost in the bigger battle away from home: his friends Juneja and Jagmohan succeeded where he failed. Curiously, Rakesh presents in *Halfway House* the male-male bonding and shuns intricacies of social dynamics in which many fail and some succeed. Also, those who succeed in the emerging world cling to their male friends in the name of solidarity (with men) under patriarchy but seldom care to protect the nuclear family they are supposed to run with commitment. Most of the difficulties visiting the *Halfway House* emanate from this careless handling by the male, who might as well have stuck as a middle class householder to the children and wife and gave them supportive company.

3.8 VIEWING POSSIBILITIES OF AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM

There is a third aspect to Savitri’s speech also that takes it outside the purview of her individual suffering. Savitri’s apparently personal statement against her husband has a broader sociological bearing – it reads more like an articulation of a complex response to a social issue with separate points explored and analyzed. In this sense, Savitri is not an individual but a person who typifies the social trend of asking too much from an institution than one gave it – a kind of unfair demand made on a social collective. In the same manner, Mahendranath becomes a symptom of a general social malady caused by the internal logic of interests that govern larger life. Can individuals, howsoever talented, dynamic and

motivated, do anything truly effective against such odds and hit upon an alternative paradigm? More, is the writer really interested in exploring or evolving such a paradigm? As a young man, Rakesh had been witness to an important phase of the National Movement and could, therefore, be expected to search for answers that were at least compatible with the values of that movement. Instead of extending the values in question, he chose to adopt the individualist competitive logic of capitalism in free India. Sidestepping history as a guide to intervention in a different phase, Rakesh elected to adopt the present-centered sociological paradigm, under which things were to be merely interpreted for the benefit of the audience. Sharing with readers/ audiences the pains and sufferings of the day was found sufficient enough through the medium of literature. Sociological logic does not leave scope for an enterprise committed to general good, since at the root of individual motivation in such cases lies the determining reality of a given world. Helplessness being the end result of such a fight between individuals on one side and the governing logic of an existing society on the other, we finally accept conclusions such as “Just a puppet ... poor Mahendra!”

All the three aspects of the speech by Savitri discussed above lead us to the conclusion that Savitri in fact does not have a say in the matter – the task assigned to her by the writer is to merely externalize her inner confusion and anguish in face of an insurmountable problem. Should we not expect the playwright to have related Savitri with broader social trends where she could engage herself a bit positively and find a way to assert herself as a working person? Her helplessness seems depressing, uncharacteristic of an intelligent woman capable to see through strategies that males generally adopt to control them. In this, the play as theatre also brings forth quite clearly the high-strung nature of Savitri's utterances in the speech quoted above – she pauses meaningfully, fumbles to find words appropriate to her feelings and goes silent every now and then to recover breath. Obviously, she hasn't thought over the issues that her interlocutor, The Fourth Man, has brought forth to draw her into the conversation and force her to say what he could later manipulate to his advantage. As theatre, *Adhe Adhure* merges entirely with the dramatic intention of the author out to give five men and a single woman chance to sort things out vis-à-vis each other. Mark the fact that the fight is of five against one and thus the result is a foregone conclusion. The speech provides an argument to Savitri's opponents to stay merrily in their well-protected positions of social power and familial dominance.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have considered gender subjugation through an analysis of Savitri's predicament in *Halfway House*. This gave us an opportunity to examine some broader aspects of the emerging social scene in post-Independence India. Patriarchy and family were the other areas that came under discussion from the point of view of women who bore pressures from these institutions even as they revealed their own concrete responses to them.

3.10 QUESTIONS

1. Write a critical note on the way Savitri confronts her husband Mahendranath in *Halfway House*.

2. How is patriarchy reflected in Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House*? Explain.
3. What is role of family in the life of a middle class woman in our times? Discuss with particular reference to Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House*.

3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Agrawal, Pratibha, *Mohan Rakesh*, New Delhi: Sahitya, 1987.

Taneja, Jaidev, *Mohan Rakesh: Ranga, Shilpa aur Pradarshan*, New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1996.



UNIT 4 DRAMATIC FORM

Structure

4.0 Objectives

4.1 Introduction

4.2 A View of Mohan Rakesh's Short Fiction and the Issue of Marriage

4.3 Representation of Reality in Short and Long Fiction as Distinct from that in Drama

4.4 Drama and the Socio- Cultural Environment

4.5 *Halfway House* as Drama of Family in Middle Class Surroundings

4.6 Concreteness of *Halfway House* as Theatre

4.7 One Actor as Playing Five Roles in *Halfway House*

4.8 Let Us Sum up

4.9 Questions

4.10 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

You will read in this unit an argument about the importance and role of drama as a literary form. The discussion will focus upon the direct contact drama has with living people in surroundings that are a combination of market, neighbourhood and the closed hall or a room. Thus, words or text are not of seminal significance in drama, since drama is not to be merely read but seen and watched. More, the words, dialogues and gestures used in drama are independent of the author in a sense they are not in the case of novel or poem, for instance.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

We plan to interpret here Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* as a dramatic representation of life in India in the post-Independence period. For us, drama in the context would cover aspects of enactment, characterization, visualization of that which is fore-grounded and that other part which (since hidden somewhere in the background) is suggested through pauses, absences, etc. At the same time, we shall also view the broader picture of representations through other forms such as fiction. This attempt is to let the student and young scholar know that Mohan Rakesh used the fictional mode in his writing quite extensively and there was indeed a significant interaction between his novel *Andhere Band Kamre*, a number of short stories and other prose accounts that contained important biographical details on the one hand and the plays he wrote on the other. All this of course happened against a backdrop that constituted cultural and ideological life-segment of great magnitude. The present unit will provide a comprehensive view of these literary-social aspects in their combination and integrity, rooted in the belief that ideas and experiences as well as specific human responses always remain intertwined.

4.2 A VIEW OF MOHAN RAKESH'S SHORT FICTION AND THE ISSUE OF MARRIAGE

The short fiction in Hindi explored diverse processes that had emerged in urban India around the time Mohan Rakesh took to writing. In the period following Independence, industrialization became a priority project in the country with most resources spared for the productive economic sector. Thus, the direction of development in free India had become clear as rural India looked towards the city for progress and growth. Necessitating shift in population from the village to the city shook the very foundations of rural India where people had lived since times immemorial along an established life-pattern. Not only were relations within in the family redefined generally, but actual bonds between men and women as husband and wife or parent and child underwent radical change. Man and woman remained no longer interdependent in the old way, as the one active in the outside world and the other managing the household exclusively – this, as we know, being the custom in the orthodox household. A new sense of equality, togetherness and companionship became the call of the times. Was it not a welcome development? Ordinarily, it would seem so. However, in the times we are talking about, this was merely a vision, a projected idea of the emerging India that offered a new life-paradigm to men and women of the nineteen fifties. That there would be complexities, stalemates and crises was only expected since the existing scenario was too vague and amorphous to make possible and sustain visions of egalitarian living. Rakesh grappled with this issue as time passed and struggled to articulate his response to the difficulties this reality posed to him. For his achieving his objective, he would experiment with a number of prose forms in literature, fiction and drama being the dominant ones among them.

Let us take up this issue at the level of form in life. There is, for instance, a form in the household according to which segregation between males and females appears not just natural but also a feasible and useful thing. With males organizing production outside the family and women taking care of rearing children and carrying out domestic chores works out quite efficiently as the two groups seldom meet and discuss things of common interest. Boundaries remain clearly demarcated and neither party expects much from the other. Consider this form of social existence in the region of drama and you would realize that a curtain is necessary on the stage to keep the area sharply divided and 'un-intruded upon'. This form stood questioned in the nineteen fifties since a sizeable part of the female population was exposed to a changed set of priorities. In the family, an area called the living room enable men and women of the household to sit together and welcome guests that also included women. Visualize this in the context of Mohan Rakesh's short stories and his play *Halfway House* and see whether this disturbs the old arrangement and creates tensions among members of the family as well as the group of family friends. Mohan Rakesh struggled to understand and capture this new form in his fictional works and plays. Let us first see this happenings in one of his well-known short stories.

This point in the specific context of Mohan Rakesh takes us to his short story 'Ek Aur Zindagi' ('One More Life') in which the stasis as a consequence of the said change in the urban middle class existence was depicted with compelling effect. Similar to *Adhe Adhure*, 'Ek Aur Zindagi' devoted itself to the emergence

of a new form of relationships within the institution of marriage in the nineteen fifties. The reigning emotion of this story being inertia and the ensuing frustration, Rakesh's name was at the time more or less synonymous with that aspect of the 'Nai Kahani' (New Short Story) trend in Hindi that stressed in negative terms the mechanical and repetitive ways of living in big cities. Under this trend, sensitive individuals got married with stars in their eyes, so to say, since they thought that marriage in their case would become a basis of raising norms of a higher value than the one prevalent at the time. The activism that such individuals envisaged through marriage would not straightforwardly critique their environment ('parivesh') in theoretical or ideological terms but have a bearing on the conditions around them and reflect critically on the attitudes of those others who passively moved with the times. The passion of these 'sensitive individuals' out to realize themselves through a different kind of marriage was such that they remained skeptical about every detail of man-woman relationship under traditional principles of matrimony.

Would such a marriage meet their imagined goals of happiness and fulfillment was the question that lurked somewhere at the back of their minds. The form we are discussing here manifested quite differently in short fiction and drama writing. Let us try to understand the specific nature of each.

4.3 REPRESENTATION OF REALITY IN SHORT AND LONG FICTION AS DISTINCT FROM THAT IN DRAMA

The critical distance from, if not antagonism to the environment I mention in the case of educated middle class individuals was bereft of the Romantic notion of rejecting the real world for an imaginary one; it took the alternative paradigm of individual-based matrimony literally. What is meant is that the individuals concerned shunned critiquing their world; instead they sought to live with things as they existed. In the event of failure coming their way, these individuals would be filled with bitterness, blaming the times in which they were born and indulging in self-pity. Mohan Rakesh particularly took up the case of fulfillment in marriage in new surroundings and combined the relationship with love, mutuality, honest dealing and self-assertion, only to realize in the process of living that another set of circumstances with different priorities in sight would solve the problem. In 'Ek Aur Zindagi', he dealt with these issues step by step and came to the conclusion, worked out through lived experience in the environs of art, that things in this enclosed circle remained static. But what was this 'lived experience'? The title of the short story in question pointed towards the principle of social typicality – such a marriage in Rakesh's opinion was the sole reality of the educated middle class in urban India. No wonder that the assumed heroism of the individual sacrificing oneself on the altar of self-created 'idealism' immediately appealed to many of those who felt devoid of worth in their day-to-day life. In 'Ek Aur Zindagi', this heroism belonged to the male protagonist. What about 'Adhe Adhure'? Under criticism from fellow writers and theatre persons that 'Adhe Adhure' let the male bias control the proceedings in the play, as the director Rajinder Nath has written, Mohan Rakesh consciously planned to do justice to the female Savitri in the play and gave her the long speech that we read in the later revised draft that constituted the final text of the play.

Around the same time as 'Adhe Adhure' formed itself in the mind of the author, the novel 'Andhere Bandh Kamre' ('The Dark Closed Rooms') had also been published. Mohan Rakesh gave in this novel the kind of picture of the household one saw in 'Adhe Adhure' and 'Ek Aur Zindagi' – young men and women with plans, such as educating children and helping them settle in jobs, to execute and the belief that they could indeed realize their long-held ambitions sooner or later. A temperament relying on hard work and commitment was common to these sensibilities that were scattered over the length and breadth of what was called 'New Fiction' – 'New Hindi Short Story' and the 'New Hindi Novel'. Rakesh seems to have been particularly obsessed with such characters in his own writing that were so typically present in these fictional trends of the time. Like 'Ek Aur Zindagi', for instance, 'Andhere Bandh Kamre' clearly hinted at a world that enclosed individual men and women within its rigid boundaries and prevented them from realizing their potential in life. Also, the novel went into the minute details of particular efforts and tactics that young aspiring individuals normally employ to reach their goals, only to see eventually that failure was inevitably in store for them. Was it not because the men and women involved in such struggles failed to see beyond their narrow world of home or house? It would have been a different case if the wider world outside home became socially equipped to handle issues of progress and development. This would entail socio-economic development in the vast rural space. This was not happening and the urban middle class could only focus upon their individual lives and conditions.

4.4 DRAMA AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Looked at from the socio-ideological angle of the ethos prevalent at the time, these three works of Mohan Rakesh comprised an integrated artistic unit that projected, with an incredible authenticity, the picture of the life of the middle class in Northern urban India. I stress this to tell that 'Adhe Adhure' can be properly understood only when we recognize the author's serious engagement with a social trend that was new, attractive and challenging, howsoever present-centered or regressive it may have been. Rakesh seems to have given so much imaginative thought to this aspect of contemporary social life that through the motions of the different characters in 'Adhe Adhure', he provides vital clues to the unfolding 'meaning' (the words 'arth', 'arthavatta', 'sarthakta', etc. formed an important part of the critical vocabulary of the period) of life in the new circumstance. In this respect, Mahendranath and Savitri seem constantly to refer (for the reader) to the three children – The Boy, The Older Girl and The Younger Girl – as their natural extensions, as persons that later in life would face the same predicament that the parents do now. Why? My answer is that the author meant to create through them an imaginary presence of a stifling structure, the one that he had faced at the level of imaginative re-creation in the other two works mentioned above.

Mohan Rakesh shared with his contemporaries the way society was to be looked at, examined and interpreted. This is to suggest that the post-Independence generation in India had no view of history and that the Indian National Movement of the previous decades meant little to them. The young scarcely saw any appeal in the idealism pursued by their elders whose inspiring examples were such

national figures as Gandhi, Nehru, Bose and Bhagat Singh. The Hindi writing of the fifties on the other hand resisted idealism as an abstract principle that people talked of but seldom practiced. Was there any reason why such a standpoint had emerged in the nineteen fifties? The question takes us back to the Partition in 1947 and communal riots that told a different and highly depressing story of the nationalist struggle. Communal riots of the Partition days distorted the vision of the Indian middle classes who saw in the new phenomenon of the nineteen fifties a perspective of individual fulfillment. A young man in the nineteen fifties, Rakesh contended with this development with a mixed feeling of happy expectation that Independence had produced and pain (he does not seem to have gone into the reasons of the phenomenon) that the society stood divided along religious-communal lines.

4.5 HALFWAY HOUSE AS DRAMA OF FAMILY IN MIDDLE CLASS SURROUNDINGS

Isn't the family an important area of life where personal, social and political facets of reality interact with each other? In the light of this question, we can further take up the points dealt with in the discussion above. What did the said antagonism between the notion of a united nationhood and the politics of religious intolerance signify? In answer, we could say that the basic motivation informing human behaviour in such a case was indeed animalistic since human beings were essentially driven by instinctive urges in those circumstances. The implicit clash is felt in *Adhe Adhure* in the depiction of not just Mahendranath and Savitri but their son and the two daughters. In fact, this is the dimension that is more or less entirely missed in the appreciation of the play – the dimension in question is supposed to merely bring out the ego-centric or somewhat larger ideological differences within matrimony. What for example is the issue faced by the Older Girl in her marriage? We have a vague idea of this in the following exchange between the daughter (the Older Girl) and the mother (The Woman Savitri). To quote:

The Woman: Sit down. Tell me the truth. Is there anything ... ?

The Older Girl: No. Nothing and yet ... everything!

The Woman: For instance?

The Older Girl: For instance ... everything!

The Woman: So you mean?

The Older Girl: I mean ... that ... before I got married I thought I knew Manoj very well. But now ...

The Woman: Hmm. Is he unfaithful?

The Older Girl: No.

The Woman: Bad-tempered?

The Older Girl: No.

The Woman: Then what is it?

The Older Girl: That's just what I can't understand. I don't know what is wrong and why.

The Woman: Is he short of money?

The Older Girl: No.

...

...

The Older Girl: It's ... it's just the air we breathe ...

...

...

The Woman: Well?

The Older Girl: That the longer two people live together, breathe the same air, ... the more estranged they become from one another.

...

...

The Woman: Then there must be a reason ...

The Older Girl: What reason? A cup of tea spilt from his hand or a short delay when he returns from work? These little things are not really reasons; they become reasons. A strange sort of feeling mounts up within me and speaks like poison through my whole being. Everything I touch or see or hear becomes distorted and I stand helpless and fearful under the spell of a destructive fate. But mama, I don't know why ... I just can't see why! It happens unasked, unforeseen. It ... it ... tortures me till I think I am going mad. And in the end? In the end, he too turns against me and says ...

The Woman: What does he say?

The Older Girl: That ... it's from this house I have taken something with me which prevents me from being natural. (4)

The problem discussed here by the mother and daughter is linked up with the essential nature of marriage, the way marriage turns into its opposite because of something that the two partners in it are unable to understand. In this dialogue, The Woman, being 'woman', knows more about the phenomenon but at the given moment she uses the rational discourse of economic difficulties, equality, compatibility and mutual understanding – this is what is reflected in the questions she has posed to the 'girl', a novice in the business. Also, the positioning of the Woman in this situation is that of a well-meaning questioner who has taken upon herself to resolve the contentious issue of 'making' or 'preserving' the 'home' of her daughter. On the stage, this issue is visualized as two happenings that go parallel to each other and render the significance of each other null and void.

4.6 CONCRETENESS OF *HALFWAY HOUSE* AS THEATRE

It is a theatrical scene in the true sense of the word – there is an interlocutor and judge in the form of the mother, the 'party' with a grievance in the form of the daughter and an audience on stage in the person of The First Man, who in fact is literally forced by the 'judge' to keep shut during the interrogation. Good theatre

this since the bigger audience in the hall watch the ‘action’ of characters caught in the situation as well as another audience in its peculiar role of trying to intervene in the matter every now and then but not allowed to do so. Wouldn’t the ‘real’ audience, too, feel the need to participate in the ‘discussion’ happening on the stage? Yet, they, too, are to merely watch the proceedings. The theatrical ‘doubling’ of the audience first and then of ‘actors’ in the scene (as *The Woman and The Older Girl* are married and discussing marriage, so would the audience wish to take an active part in the ‘session’) is so well conceived and executed that for once we entirely accept *The Older Girl*’s version of marriage – “I stand helpless and fearful under the spell of a destructive fate”. Interestingly, *Halfway House* has deployed the technique of democratic exchange between two or more parties but actually put one in the seat of authority and the other in that of helpless listeners or speakers who are not supposed to be taken seriously.

What one finds hard to accept in this scene is the steamrolling of the active consciousness of the characters involved. Being drama and theatre, *Adhe Adhure* is supposed to produce a clash of interests as well as exchange of views that take the characters and the audience into the wider world of marriages, divorces, relationships, struggles involved in being single in a vast patriarchal set up, etc. Something is being done at the expense of the dramatic form – a riddle is presented not through dialogue but through a series of stoppages, silences, stammerings – all merely struggles of an individual who has seen and known it all. We also note that use of the ‘poetic’ and the ‘philosophical’ – the way it has been made to serve the purpose of eliminating the ‘dialogue’ – may be appropriate for representation in other literary forms, but not in drama that is supposed to recognize and stress dichotomies, antagonisms and conflicts in actual life. If that does not happen, the world away from the theatre would lose out on its democratic ways of difference-oriented pluralism; the actual world (in which characters represented by actors and the audience live) would either stand negated or reduced to ‘inaction’ through authoritarian/ fascist handlings of uncomfortable developments. When the Older Girl says: “What reason? A cup of tea spilt from his hand or a short delay when he returns from work? These little things are not really reasons; they become reasons. A strange sort of feeling mounts up within me and spreads like poison through my whole being”, she becomes an excuse in the hands of the writer to launch an attack on ‘reason’ (“reason”, “not really reasons”, “become reasons” – the changing meaning of the word through punning reinforces the point I make) and also state that the example supporting the Older Girl’s thesis of “A strange feeling” spreading “like poison through my whole being” leaves us with no possibility to refute, or even differ with the view being presented on the stage. The use of ‘theatre’, life-like fumbings, the build-up through stoppages and interruptions work here under the logic of rhetoric that can be largely seen as ‘anti-drama’. There is rhetoric in almost every other situation in the play because of which the effect of this scene and the play as a whole is nothing but overwhelming, indeed ‘stunning’ (6).

Is the rhetoric we notice in the situations of the play integral to the text, the captured totality of the phenomenon? To answer this question, the earlier reference to the fictional works of Mohan Rakesh might help. Again, this is a question of form. The aesthetic of the short story or novel has a continuity that is equivalent to a flow, an ongoing movement from one end of the text to the other. There are, of course, instances where the direction of the fictional work with respect to its

movement is deliberately changed and its principle of 'ongoing' process violated. But such violations are done to problematize the literary effort and reveal the unpredictability of the 'action' sought to be represented in the text. The form of fiction, its twentieth century/ modernist manifestation, however, imposes a discipline on the writer to 'depict', tell or 'narrate' (these are Georg Lukacs's words) so that a sort of lyricism, highly subjective and forceful, asserts itself in the literary work. (7) This was particularly noticed in the short and long fiction of Mohan Rakesh where he insistently brought out that part of the modern-day living which had reached a dead end – a point in history that refused to look ahead (or back) and move. Marriages, individual friendships, living alone by artists to lead bohemian lives, etc. became significant points of reference in the new situation. All fiction of Mohan Rakesh bears testimony to the precise working out of this aesthetic principle in social existence. However, when the said aesthetic (of the 'dead end' situation) was used for dramatic representation in *Adhe Adhure*, it left little scope for testing, questioning/ self-questioning or placing the imagined situations in their relation with the ones actually present in the society of the time.

The descriptive aesthetic of modern/ modernist fiction disallowed any 'dialogic' or dramatic projection of the chosen situations. E. Alkazi has drawn attention to this aesthetic (appreciatively though) while commenting on the stage-effect in *Adhe Adhure* of a certain scene where we are faced with, as he says, "a heap of broken furniture, moth-eaten files, pieces of wood and iron, torn magazines and stinking cups and saucers." For Alkazi, these details "intensify the atmosphere of suffocation and loneliness and become symbols of disintegrated life" (8). This in my opinion is a part of the rhetoric that drowns the submerged attitudes and counter-voices as well as differences, since the "suffocation" is built up in the scene so assertively. Another way to deal with the issue may have been to let the clashing perspectives come out in the open and use their own dramatic/ theatrical space to address the audience. In such a situation, twistings of form and excessive use of silences could be usefully done away with for capturing tones and colours of actual life evolving in the specific conditions of the nineteen fifties.

4.7 ONE ACTOR AS PLAYING FIVE ROLES IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*

Is the employment of the technique of one actor playing all the five male roles not symptomatic of *Adhe Adhure* presenting a larger-than-necessary generalization of the marriage situation and what has been called 'House' in the English title *Halfway House*? Om Shivpuri, who enacted the multiple roles in *Adhe Adhures* first production in 1969 had this to say on the issue: "At one level, this play is a manifestation of similarity of the human experience in spite of the many individual shades found in it. To this end, the dramatist has relied upon the interesting experiment of making one single actor essay five different roles. If Mahendranath is replaced by Jagmohan or Jagmohan by Juneja, no radical difference would occur, for the reason that the mould of specific situation compels the individual to follow the same path as any other person would. To emphasize this, a few stage-productions began with a spotlight that was focused on a mask" (9) Coming as it does from a renowned actor and director of plays, it gives the interpretation that many in the world of Hindi theatre accept and some have contested – quite

sharply. Nemichandra Jain thought, for instance, that a narrow segment of experience was blown out of proportion to erroneously make the play's theme representative of the entire humanity. He dwelt on the point further by saying that "barring perhaps Mahendranath," no character in the play has raised the question "Who am I" in the world that s/he inhabits. This, says Jain, is in spite of the fact that the play raises the issue of identity in a big way and aims to apply universally to all men in all times(10). A bit severe, the comment does take the reader to the important question of outlook on social/ human life. Jain has also made the pertinent point that the theory or ideology of sameness in different situations may be sociologically interesting, but it does not go far in making the viewer conscious about the nature of relationships that one actually confronts in life. (All page numbers in the above discussion refer to Jain, Nemichandra, ed. Sampoorana Natak).

The difficulty, however, lies in considering the 'five-roles-one-actor' idea in the play to be a matter of technique alone. More than technique, this idea provides to the play a peculiar structure that controls all happenings and changes as well as differences marking the play. It strengthens the basic argument of this paper that the aesthetic of the rhetoric of modernist fiction stands as a wall between the understandability of human/ social life in its process of change and the stalemate that human existence is supposed to have reached in the contemporary world. Given such an aesthetic, the 'powerful' speech of Savitri stands easily countered by her final admission later in the play that she cannot exist without Mahendranath. In any case, it does not seem to matter whether she is married to Mahendranath or makes a working liaison with another of the five males in the play. Worth noting in this context is the following comment by Dilip Basu:

I think the play *Adhe-Adhure* hesitates, structurally, between the naturalistic and the absurdist.

When the same actor is seen performing in four different roles, there is in the auditorium a sense of watching a delightful game, and a positive expectation that the actor will be good enough to portray the difference in these four persons. The delight in the game subdues to a degree the claustrophobic feeling of watching a set of people within the four walls of a home where happiness, mutual relations and communication have rotted almost beyond recovery. Looking for the difference in the presentation of the four persons by one actor works in direct contradiction to a search for the essential likeness of the four men encouraged at the outset by The Man in A Black Suit. This 'likeness' is 'recognized' through our seeing the same actor continuing to perform; the recognition does not register from any similitude amongst the four men dramatically emerging from the script with any clarity. The four variations of 'Man' presented in the play do not combine to give a powerful impression of 'Everyman' systematically revealed, though The Prologue together with the naming of the characters as The First Man, The Second Man, etc. – all to be played by the same actor – do encourage such a search (The implied understanding of 'Man' in Rakesh's play, of course, is one belonging to Indian middle-class; there is some hesitation – to which we shall very soon have to respond – as to whether it is a male human being or any human being belonging to this group). (126-7).

Here, Basu has talked of ‘four’ (or five) roles that the actor is supposed to play and termed the different roles in *Halfway House* as “variations” of ‘Man’. Basu has rightly raised the issue of male and female in the context of Indian middle class and suggested that females do not belong to the category of middle class with adequate authority: there being “hesitation” on the writer’s part about an integral link (even within the educated middle class) between the sexes. Thus the gendered constructs remain fixed and separate in the play and only a secondary place is assigned to the female protagonist. At the level of form, too, whereas the male has a number of “variations”, the female is confined to the category of a single individual prone to making one misjudgment after another. Basu is justified in assessing the limited worth of Savitri under the pattern that *Halfway House* has captured and projected.

4.8 LET US SUM UP

Mohan Rakesh has used the drama form in *Halfway House* quite earnestly. Foremost among the techniques used by the writer is the assigning of five male roles to one actor. Then, even as all other characters have individual names in the body of the text (the names of characters get mentioned in the middle of the dialogues), they are referred to as man, boy, older girl, younger girl, etc. consistently. Dialogues, too, have a naturalistic air about them – close to what we come across in short or long fiction. When we keep these things in mind, an entirely different version of the depicted incidents and situations comes forth through drama perceived as theatre. Also as a result of this, the play gains in resonance and widening of appeal.

4.9 QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between Drama and theatre keeping in mind Mohan Rakesh’s *Halfway House*.
2. What is the significance of an actor playing five roles in *Halfway House*?
3. *Halfway House* ends at the same point where it began. Comment

4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

George, K. M., ed., *Modern Indian Literature: An Anthology, Vol – Three, Plays and Prose*, New Delhi: Sahitya, 1994.

Yadav, Rajendra, ed., *Ek Duniya Samanantar*, New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1993.