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**Address**

• Vikram Nagar, Boudhi Chouk, Latur.  
• Tq. Latur, Dis. Latur 413512 (MS.)  
• (+91) 9922455749, (+91) 8999250451

**Email**

• aiirjpramod@gmail.com  
• aayushijournal@gmail.com

**Website**

• www.aiirjournal.com

**CHIEF EDITOR – PRAMOD PRAKASHRAO TANDALE**

**Mahesh Elkunchwar's Reflection: A Journey from Nothingness to Nothingness**

Research Guide

**Dr. S. B. Bhambar**

Head, Department of English,  
T. K. Kolekar College  
of Arts & Commerce,  
Nesari, Tal – Gadhinglaj Sawantwadi, Sindhudurg- 416510

Research Student

**Mr.B.N.Hiramani**

Asst. Professor,  
Dept. of English  
Shri.Pancham Khemraj Mahavidyalaya,  
bnhirmani05@gmail.com

**Abstract:**

*Mahesh Elkunchwar is an eminent dramatist in Marathi language. More than 20 plays are to his credit. He has handled almost all 'isms' in drama, i.e. Realism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Existentialism and Absurd. 'Reflection' (Pratibimb) is a landmark work having psychoanalytical overtones. Characters from his play 'Reflection', Elkunchwar has illustrated the representative and universal conflict between the materialistic and existentialistic ideologies. The play focuses on the search and scrutiny of life. The dramatist has tried to shade a light on inner suffering, psychological melodrama which made the play 'a psychological wonder'. This play showcases the inner world of the characters- Woman, He, Flags and Girl.*

**Keywords:** Psychoanalism and allied terms, materialism, existentialism, alienation, escapism, absurd.

Theatre of Absurd refers to a literary movement in drama, popular throughout European countries from the 1940s to approximately 1989. The "Theatre of the Absurd" is a term coined by the Hungarian- born critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of his 1962 book on the subject. The term refers to a particular type of play which first became popular during 1950s and 60s and which presented on the stage the philosophy articulated by French philosopher Albert Camus in his 1942 essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus', in which he defines the human condition as basically meaningless. Camus argued that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond its reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd. According to Esslin, the absurd playwright loosely grouped under the label of the absurd attempt to convey their sense of bewilderment, anxiety and wonder in the face of an inexplicable universe.

The traditional theatre attempts to create a photographic representation of life as we see it, the Theatre of Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dream. The focal point of these dreams has often man's fundamental questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice, and suffering. Ionesco defined the absurdist as "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots..... lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd useless. The Theatre of Absurd, in a sense attempts to establish man's communion with the universe". John Culik says that "Absurd theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age, by making man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, by instilling in him again the lost sense of the cosmic wonder and primeval anguish. The Theatre of Absurd hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that here is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition".

Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abundant the straight

jacket of logic. As Dr. Culik points out, “Rationalist thought like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up the gleams of infinite.”

Absurd playwrights adhered to the theories of French- Algerian philosopher Albert Camus in particular his essay *'The Myth of Sisyphus'*, published in 1942. In this essay, Camus introduced his philosophy of Absurd in which he argues that man's quest for meaning and truth is a futile endeavour; he compares men's struggle to understand the world and the meaning of life to Sisyphus, a famous figure in Greek Mythology condemned to an existence of rolling heavy stone up a mountain only to watch it roll to the bottom.

Critics believed that Theatre of Absurd arose as a movement from the doubts and fear surrounding World War II and what many people saw as the degeneration of traditional moral and political values. The movement flourished in France, Germany and England, as well as in Scandinavian Countries. Several of the founding works of the movement include Jean Gennet's *'The Maids'* (1947), Eugene Ionesco's *'The Bald Soprano'* (1950), Arthur Adamov's *'Ping-Pong'* (1955) and Samuel Beckett's *'Waiting for Godot'* (1953).

Plays categorized in this movement typically represent human existence as nonsensical and often chaotic. Absurdist's works rarely follow a clear plot, and what action occurs serves only to heighten the sense that characters are mere victims of unknown, arbitrary forces beyond their control, dialogue is often redundant, setting and passage of time within the play unclear and characters express frustration with deep, philosophical question, such as the meaning of life and death and existence of God.

Sigmund Freud's *'Civilisation and its Discontents'* (1929) demonstrated man's potential for developing new perception which includes full acknowledgement and acceptance of loss mortality. He examines the larger questions of existence and death and the dangers inherent in man's failure to address these issues. The characters typically from absurd theatre travel the same general direction of alienation.

Mahesh Elkunchwar born in 1939 is an Indian playwright, screenplay writer with more than 20 plays to his name, in addition to his theatrical writings, critical works and his active work in India's parallel cinema as an actor and screen writer. He is one of the most influential and progressive playwrights not just in Marathi theatre but also in Indian theatre. He presents a wide range of dramatic situations, theatrical devices and speech rhythms in his plays which portray preoccupation with death, loneliness, creativity, the illusion of wealth, and apparent purposelessness of choice or actions while the ultimate goal of life remain unknown. As a dramatist, he has been successful in portraying human predicament in the face of death, loneliness and illusions of all kind leading to apparent purposelessness. (Lal 120), he writes like the Absurdist for whom realities being meaningless, there is no God and man's life is reduced to mere circular progress from nothing to nothing. The true field of battle is inside us, in the Unconscious. The Absurdist have no story or plot, not recognizable characters, no proper theme with no beginning and end. They reflect dreams and nightmares with incoherent babbling (Esslin 21/22). The playwright presents characters who are migrants to the metropolis “Brought together by chance, rootless, with rootlessness as their only bond” (qtedBandopadhyay XI).

In *'Reflection'*, the playwright has probed into the meaningless life young people live in our contemporary society, devoid of social, ethical and moral values, leading to loss of identity. These all people who appear in his plays are extremely alienated, confused, unable to face the harsh realities of life and also escapists, living in an illusory world of their own, with no ties with relatives.

Elkunchwar once said in his interview, ‘I always wanted to live in an illusory world. I prefer to be in my own company. I avoid contacts as far as possible. And I am the happiest if I am allowed an unrestrained freedom to journey inwards. It might sound selfish, but that is the way I am.

The *'Reflection'* is a play about four characters who all are fit to the above discussed features of man. The story of the play can be summarized as follows which revolves around four absurdist viz. He, Woman, Flagg and the Girl. ‘He’ stays as a paying guest in the house of a Woman whose husband is



dead. The story begins with 'He' is awoken from deep sleep by the ringing doorbell, telephone ring and alarm simultaneously. The ringing bells aware him his duties which he doesn't want to meet. In the sense 'He' helplessly tries to avoid his responsibilities. Woman comes with broom in one hand and a cup of tea in another which he did not like. The 'Woman' who wakes up early in the morning for her home work reminds him of his duties which he dislikes. Woman continues chattering while 'He' has the problem of loss of his reflection. Nothingness begins here from the very beginning of the play. When 'He' speaks on the cleanliness of the mirror, the Woman speaks on the cleanliness of the human from the inner.

Woman: Cleanliness is important after all. A person must be clean inside and out, his heart, his clothes, his habits.

The plot continues with the topic of cleaning mirrors in rooms. 'He' insists the Woman to clean the mirrors, so he can see his reflection clearly. Here 'He' complains that the mirror is not showing his reflection. 'He' tries to confirm whether the mirror is okay by requesting the Woman to see herself in the mirror, and asks whether the Woman could see her reflection. Woman says yes but still 'He' is unable to see his reflection. 'He' cleans the first mirror and tries to see his reflection but fails. So 'He' tries in another mirror but he fails again. 'He' tells the Woman that he has lost his reflection, it has disappeared. The Woman doesn't believe and teases him. The Woman further tells 'He' that how one can lose one's reflection, it might be hallucination. The plot moves forward on the topic of reflection in the mirror. They argue on the existence of reflections. The Woman tries to convince 'He' that we all have reflections who have bodies. The Woman is of the ideology that bodily reflection is the reflection which everybody has. To this point 'He' asks how it can be proved. On that, Woman says that there are two ways to prove reflection. One is reflection itself and other way is by another body. Woman believes more in physical existence, with which 'He' does not agree. But the Woman discourse with 'He' telling him that his bodily reflection might has bored him, and that is the reason that he couldn't see his reflection. This dilemma is found from the beginning to the end of the play, which is seen in every word uttered by 'He', the protagonist of the play. 'He' is unable to accept and believe that existing state if human existence. 'He' denies all the existence which is seen in his discourse with first 'Woman' then 'Flags' and lastly 'Girl'. They all try to convince 'He' but remained failed and ultimately 'He' commits suicide by jumping from fifth floor. This is what the plot of the play *'Reflection'*.

What is more interesting in the play is that 'He' is encountered with the three- Woman, Flags and Girl. 'He' and the remaining three characters are totally different from each other- their approaches towards life, and the existence of human being. 'He' is totally away from the existing ways of life, who denies and denies and tries to escape himself. 'He' is firm to his escapism, pessimism, or absurdities, who feels and thinks that the whole is meaningless, while the three have different ideologies or philosophies of human life. It will be very interesting to look into 'He' and his confrontation with three, one by one.

Woman in the life of 'He' has a significant role. She is not only the service provider but tries to trap him in her love, not love but lust. As the Woman has lost her husband and so she needs a male partner. The Woman is sexually attracted towards 'He', though 'He' is beyond this all. Woman tries to lite the flame of lust in 'He', 'He' is unaffected. The initial discourse between 'He' and Woman is on the topic of 'Reflection' which 'He' has lost. The Woman constantly tells him that human being who has body cannot be without reflection. Wherever there is man, there is reflection. He could not believe this all. They argue a lot on the reflection, mirrors, cleanliness of the mirrors and so on. But the 'Woman' has nothing to do with this useless, nonsense discourse because she is much more attached with 'He', sexually, lustily.

Woman: Don't allow such thoughts to enter your mind. Allow only good thoughts to come in.

He: What do you mean allow? Do you think thoughts are sheep or cattle to be brought in by their ears?

Woman: *Aayya*. Why should you think of cattle and sheep? You are a limit. You are young. Your mind should have thoughts befitting a young man. As our *Rigveda* says: *Aa no bhadrahitawoyantuvishwtah*. Let noble thoughts come to me from all directions.

He: Huh! Vedas in 1984! Did this Veda chaps ever face a problem like mine?

Woman: Well then, there's a modern song which runs:

The door of two minds are open,

The spring breeze lashes around.

He is not in the mood to listen such useless songs and quotations when Woman continues her romantic discourse.

Woman: It may, you know. It will, actually. One should be prepared for everything. You shouldn't reject anything. The window of the mind should be kept open- always.

The Woman becomes more romantic though 'He' is still unmoved. She says to 'He' that the window of his mind was so narrow, that he has tightly closed the window of his mind.

Woman: Oh dear! The window of your mind is so narrow. How can splendid, magnificent thoughts ever enter? I made it though. And fell gently on your bed itself (She blushes and laughs. She is wearing flimsy nightie over her sari. He is unmoved. Now she leaps in the air and comes down with a thudding of both feet on the floor) *Kissochmeindubehuweho? Kyamujhse koi galtihogayi?Mujhsenaraj to nahin?Chalo hum Kashmir jayenge*.

He: For God's sake, Woman...

Woman: Woman no more... I'm HemaMalini and you are Dharmindar. I'm Suvarnamalinivasant and you're Sootshekhar, I'm a dose of Hemgrabha and you are...

He: Oh, Bai, will you please stop for a little while?

Woman: No, no, no. I'm not stopping. The stopper's the loser. What dreams I've brought to your mind! Mow let's both get lost in them. (Sings) O my dream-buds!

The Woman thus remains romantic for a long time 'He' is unaffected, busy in the problem of his lost of reflection that is the loss of his existence. To this moment the doorbell rings. 'He' asks to see who is at the door. It is the man enters delighted, he is Mr. Flags.

The second person who comes in contact with 'He' is Flags. Flags also is totally different from 'He'. In the play Flags is the mouthpiece of Marx and Marxism. The same is repeated here, that 'He' tells flags that 'He' has lost his reflection. Flags has a fine explanation on the lost of reflection. Actually Flags in not the person but a representative of a system. Flags represents a system existed in the present world. Flags gives a powerful answer on the lost of reflection to 'He'.

He: Is losing one's reflection a trivial they according to you?

Flags: Blocks, do you know that in this city alone ninety-nine percent of people live below the reflection line? Who listens to their complaints? Only the petite bourgeois like you go whining about things like that. You're really terrible people- selfish and self-centred. Constantly thinking of yourselves and your reflections. Arrey, why the hell do you need this worthless reflection? You are not such an Adonis that you have a pretty reflection. Blocks, don't get angry if I tell you the truth. But when you are not actually before me, I just can't remember what you look like. However hard I try, I just see a vague shape. With eyes and nose and ears. That's not surprising. You're like a million or ten million other people. What would there be that's worth remembering in you, Blockhead? So why bother with fancy things like reflections? One wouldn't find you in a crowd if one tried. A crowd- that's the thing- what is one puny individual unit? And what difference will it make to the world if you have lost your reflection? What? Speak!

The Flags advices him to shave and go off to work in style. He is unable to believe in the words of Flags.



Thus Flags' lifestyle is like a common man. When 'He' is so anxious about his loss of reflection; Flags teases him who advocates and admires the labour class. Flags tells 'He' that many such people are there in the city of Mumbai who do not know their reflection, are completely unconscious of their reflection. He mentions there, the people who work from morning to night full of sweat and unable to get time to see their reflection. When 'He' is under tension of lost of reflection, Flags is busy by thing how to establish equality. Therefore for him, equality is more important than one's lost reflection. Even he criticised man's unlimited desire that we all are busy with want, want and want. Therefore, Flags wants revolution and he also thinks the people like 'He' are the obstacles in the way of revolution. Flags tells 'He' that those who indulge in the luxury of private joys and sorrows have no right to be living in this world. Here, 'He' again tells Flags that his reflection has left his body, his mind and his wealth. Again nothingness is observed here. 'He' is not satisfied with the discourse with Flags. 'He' feels darkness from all the side and that he calls it freedom, freedom of such quality that he says, 'Aji mi Brahma pahile. (I have seen Brahma today). To this moment the bell rings to the second time and 'He' says it is the last bell tolling. He again went into the nothingness. Actually the bell ring was the indication of someone's arrival and it was the Girl who comes there.

This is the moment when the next person who comes into the contact of 'He' is 'Girl'. The Girl is similar to 'He'. When 'He' has lost his reflection, the Girl has lost her name. She doesn't know her name, but she tells that she is called by the name of Broomstick. From the whole conversation between 'He' and Girl it is seen that Girl loves 'He'. She wants love to be returned from 'He'. The Girl has a big admiration for 'He' because she tells that in the heap of such old and broken things in his office, 'He' looks very handsome.

Girl (*very sentimentally*): Now, how am I tell you this? I love you. It is a silent love. I've gazed at you in the office with such longing for so long. How handsome you look- the incoming files to your right, the outgoing files to your left, their dusty yellow colour, the old table, the inkpot, the penholder, the paperweight, the calendar on the wall with the picture of an *Adivasi girl* dangling her feet in water, and Mrs. Gandhi's photograph, the Godrej cupboard. The records tied to the red cloth to the left, and beyond that the broken door of the toilet which does not bolt. In the midst of all this, you, the lord of my heart, looking so good, so right, like the sun shining at the centre of the nine planets, like candy among popcorn, like a shining boot in a heap of old chappals.

As the conversation continued further, 'He' tells the Girl that he has lost his reflection and this truth is known to the Girl. The Girl also has lost her reflection.

He: Tell me what you have come here for.

Girl: would you like to know the truth?

He: Yes. Please.

Girl: I found out you'd lost your reflection.

He: What?

Girl: Yes.

The Girl continues her dialogues with 'He' and comes to the topic of the Woman that how women have to guard and take care of kumkum, both before marriage and after marriage.

But Girl loves him genuinely. Her love is eternal, it is not like Woman. She wants to marry 'He' and live a life of common people. His nothingness is not still ended. The Girl tries to tell him in a philosophical language, but 'He' remains unaffected. 'He' is firm in his denial, denying everybody either by Woman, Flags or the Girl. 'He' is unable to believe in the philosophy of marriage which 'He' thinks it as the mean activities. According to him living together two is like breeding brats. When the Girls begs for love, 'He' teases her telling that living together is another old trick. 'He' does not believe in the words what the Girl speaks out, who finally tells the Girl that there is total darkness in his mind. 'He' washes out the mind named such faculty existed in human being. 'He' at any condition, is unable to

accept what the Girl tells him. 'He' denies and denies which ultimately leads him to jump from the fifth floor.

### Conclusion-

The 'Reflection' is such a meaningful play which can be summarized from the thematic point of view that it is a journey of almost all characters from nothingness to nothingness, particularly the journey of 'He'. 'He' is found such a young man who doesn't believe in his existence. He has a big agony of self-existence, is purposeless and pessimistic. He is also against the efforts to equalize the society. 'He' is such a man that his lifestyle is vague and misleading. 'He' is the victim of conflict of ideologies who in search of identity loses his own identity, reflection less, that is mindless and emotionless. The Woman tries to seek lust, is so practical and pragmatic. The Flags who tries to establish equality rejecting the elite class wants revolution. While Girl tries to seek eternal love, is very optimistic, wants to live, but it is 'He' who is full of nothingness could not fulfil her desires. Thus the play is a fine journey from nothingness to nothingness, where 'He' is the main traveller of this journey.

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