

Satish Alekar's The Dread Departure: A Black Comedy via Distancing Effect

Dr. Rautrao Shivkumar Bhimrao,
Assistant Professor,
P.G.& Research Dept. of English,
Dayanand College of Arts, Latur

Satish Alekar is one of the most influential and progressive playwrights of post Independent India, from among the trio with Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar that shaped modern Marathi Theatre. Throughout his plays he exploits traditions and deals with extraordinary themes and treats them from a new practical point of view. He is well known for his ironic perspective on life. In '*The Dread Departure*' he mocks at the overt seriousness and malpractices that are undergoing with the death rites. The play is a new experiment in Marathi Theatre by his unique use of black humor, language style and absurdity. Alekar conveys the oblique sense of reality.

'*The Dread Departure*' is a comedy that employs black humor – a subgenre of comedy and satire in which laughter arises from cynicism and skepticism. Coined by surrealist theoretician Andre Breton, Black humor deals with topics and events that are usually regarded as taboo, specifically death is treated in an unusually humorous or satirical manner, while retaining their seriousness. The intent of black comedy therefore is often for the audience to experience both laughter and discomfort. As Brecht says "Humor is a sense of distance." (Styan: 142). The idea of distancing lies at the very centre of Brecht's theory. The familiar things are seen to be unfamiliar and macabre. Brecht defines distancing as, "A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar." (Styan: 151). This Distancing Effect is used by the dramatist to make familiar aspects of the present social reality seem strange, so as to prevent the emotional identification or involvement of the audience with the characters and their action in a play. The aim was to evoke a critical distance and attitude in the spectator's mind, in order to arouse them to take action against, rather than simply to accept the state of society and behavior represented on the stage. In this play Alekar employs black humor that results into distancing effect.

The very title of the play '*Mahanirvana*' translated as '*The Dread Departure*' sounds parody. The word 'Mahanirvan' literally stands for departing of great souls and sages. But in this play it deals contrary with the death of a common middle class man Bhaurao who resides in a typical Maharashtrian Chawl with his wife – Rama and Son – Nana. It is author's deliberate attempt to desecralise and with his areligious attitude he strikes to the effect of distancing.

Brecht and his theory of distancing effect are influenced by Marx's concept of Alienation. Marx uses Alienation effect in the political context. Brecht uses it comparatively for socio-political point of view and to bring social moral purpose to the theatre. Here in '*The Dread Departure*' Alekar has used it with socio-cultural context. He uses themes dealing with religious rituals which are close to the heart of Indians. '*The Dread Departure*' is an unusually irreverent text that plays with the traditional Marathi musical mode of the mourning *Keertan* and the theme of death. In Hindu culture death is something not only tragic but also inauspicious, unmentionable, not to be discussed and certainly never to be joked about or made fun of it. Alekar here breaks a long standing Indian theatrical tradition. Not only he depicts a taboo subject of death on the stage but also presents it with a mixture of realism, absurdity, song, dance and shuddering black humor. The story is about a dead man who wants to be cremated the way he wants to be and no other way, and lives on as a dead man till he stinks and his Son-Nana battles with civic rules to honor his father's last wishes and his widow gets

enamored by a ghostly lover. Even the writer has used many synonyms for death such as – crisis day, most dire day, and rare day for neighbors, calamity, dread departure etc.

As the play is about a man's death Alekarunmistakably depicts the religious rituals and traditions, those are related with death and after death. Pouring of the Ganga water and putting basil leaf in the mouth of cadaver, picking up the bier on shoulders, cremation of giving fire to the pyre, the tenth day's offering of rice balls to the dead, thirteenth day feast for pal-bearers etc. are evidences of rituals of typical Hindu culture. Alekar's main focal point is not to glorify the rituals but to mock at the malpractices and blind beliefs which are prevailing and dominating over the centuries on society. Not even he points out the culture or tradition but brings out the pitfalls and their irrelevance in the contemporary society. He questions directly to the age old customs and rituals and this questioning brings out his distance from culture or tradition, which is mutely and meekly followed by the common man. Living under the threat of tradition, no one dares, to question the rituals but Nana in the first act is seen questioning, when all the neighbors are waiting for Nana – ason who will light the fire to the corpse of father Bhaurao, his reaction over the situation is "You should not have waited... don't you know that it will begin to decompose?" (Alekar: 40) Though it seems ironic, it is practically apt. The scene of two quarreling men fighting with each other over the issue of offering rice balls to the crow on the tenth day and finally culminating into throwing of rice balls at each other is a parody of selfish, self centered human being. This areligious attitude successfully brings distancing effect. Bribing the watchman to sneak into the closed crematorium, kerosene from the black market points out the distance between culture and human being in this practical modern world.

To achieve distancing effect actor has to make clear to his audience his 'Gestus' or demonstrable social attitude, his basic disposition. He would drive his character from the actions of the person he portrayed. Sometimes the actor has to do his work objectively, he would speak with a certain resent or distance or repeat an action slowly or stop to explain to the audience what he was doing. In *'The Dread Departure'* the protagonist is not a live human being but dead Bhaurao's Soul. The dead Bhaurao plays narrator, commentator role throughout the play. He comments on the discomfiture of the dead body as it is being made ready for cremation – "one of the ropes has caught, caught me in the jaw and cut my tongue in two and though I don't mind the basil leaf bit it's making me very sick. Just that I'am dead and my groans and complaints and coughs and sick ups can't be heard." (Alekar: 33), comment on the neighbors, "They are past masters at cremations, I can tell you. Their hands calloused with roping bamboos together for biers. And there hasn't been a death in our block for long time, so the news of my death fell upon their ears like rain on parched land. Come ye and celebrate." (Alekar: 29), as a visionary he comments on life and death, body and soul. "What a body all about but the flesh and the bones? /for once you are dead and gone/ then comes the time of the bone..." (Alekar: 24). The most experimental treatment with the character of Bhaurao is his role as Narrator (*Sutradhara*) and his direct address to the audience,

"So there you are, my friends. That is how I died. A good man called Bhaurao was cut off in the prime of his life." (Alekar: 25). In act two

"There's the bell, folks,
So take your seats.
We continue to tell folks,
of a man's demise." (Alekar: 47)

In the first act we see Bhaurao as a narrator and in second act Nana is narrator and takes the lead. These two characters are the main focal point of Author. Other characters are also used but they are not individualized or given detailed characterization. Rama, wife of Bhaurao, also has given a little stage. Only in the beginning of first act and second act and the scene in which Bhaurao is

wooing her in the guise of 'Third from the left.' Her character totally changes from a morning widow within thirteen days of morning and she soon starts to dream of 'Third man from the left' who will complete the 'empty frame of her dream and life.' Other characters such as neighbors, two men, a watchman etc are not given elaborate characterization. They come on the stage only for once or twice. Many of them are even identified with their number e.g. Neighbor 1, Neighbor 2, Man 1, Man 2 etc. Alekar uses as juxtaposition of human society or in other words they give glimpse of whole human nature in a micro size. Here author with character's language, nature, style, manners and their communication has presented absurdity which is human. So the characters are not ordinary characters as in any typical plays but they are different, they are anti-heroes, comic, pathetic. The form of habit they exhibit is unholy and their behavior purposeless which creates restlessness in audience.

The various conventions, the chorus, the music, the seemingly unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of human and non human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternate point of views. They allow to borrow phrase from Bertolt Brecht "Complex seeing." Death, the most serious thing is treated in a light hearted manner and given musical liturgical mode in two different kinds of *Keertans*, the more traditional style given to the dead Bhaurao. E.g. "All your knowledge and your art all in vein, if you know not

Pandurang, Pandurang" (Alekar: 29)

Another is the modern style to the mourners, to Bhaurao's 'Old crematorium...? Sung to the tune of "Blessed are the meek..." and the Hindi film song that he sings during his drunken courtship with his wife -which is dropped in Alekar's later plays. Playing of 'Last letter starts the rhyme' beside the cadaver is height on that. Death has got complex meaning, for Bhaurao his death is 'untimely', for Nana Bhau's death is 'responsibility fallen on his shoulders', for neighbors it is a rare day and cause of celebration, for watchman it is opportunity for moneymaking, for Rama Bhaurao's death is to make her free from the household four walls and dreaming of an 'empty frame' and man with 'suit and specs.' Everyone though show sympathy, but all have their hidden desires to fulfill. By employing the character, who is dead and showing him to live life in death author blends the two worlds one human and other non-human and contrasts their ideologies and wishes. The dead is waiting to be free by the final cremation but other human world is practically thinking and trying to take opportunity of it. Thus '*The Dread Departure*' successfully brings out complex seeing and its significance.

Author has experimented with narration and it is presented in the style of 'Akhyana'. 'Aakhyana' is Sanskrit world that stands for folk tale especially Indian, which is often with a moral. It is always in prose, the climactic middle part being in verse. As a narrator of Aakhyana Alekar chooses the dead Bhaurao's soul and specifically the dead Bhaurao himself comes out of his dead body and narrates Akhyana of his departure.

"And so, the way of all flesh, folks and friends!

In the long run we're all dead.

I know I am! of high blood pressure.

Before the sun rose high,

In Nana's absence died I. "(Alekar: 26).

In second act from the beginning till the fire given to the pyre of Bhaurao the lead for narration is taken by Nana and at the last the end of akhyana is done by Bhaurao himself. At a time it also gives philosophic message – "When you are alive your sorrows are for sharing. But when you are dead they are only for bearing." (Alekar: 25) Also as a visionary, Bhaurao narrates about body and soul, death and life.

"What is this body all about but the flesh and the bones?

for once you are dead and gone.

Then comes the time of the bone." (Alekar: 24)

Thus it also serves its moral purpose.

The farce is successfully used to create black humor. The episode in which Nana assuming the role of the crow to collect the holy rice balls offered to the dead, culminating in Nana's second encounter with the dead Bhaurao who is sewing on his fallen off finger and seeking 'exit' in the face of his desperate bid to meet his window is a piece of farce that can stand on its own. The playful theatricality of the two men in their late thirties but both dressed as little boys fighting over rice balls and insulting each other till Nana turns into the crow in black toga, wearing dark glasses and brings them to order is an act of farcical desecration. The farce successfully helps to create antipathy in the mind of the audience which is the purpose of distancing effect.

The actor to achieve distancing effect would 'show' rather than imitate. For this purpose Brecht advocated number of devices such as the actor would speak in the third person or in the past tense. Many of the soliloquies of Bhaurao are in third person, "A good man called Bhaurao was cut off in the prime of his life. Or he left the fears of life at the entrée. Or in short he died." (Alekar: 25).

Sometimes he even speaks the stage directions.

"And so everything made ready. My neighbors are busy making the bier for my body. While tying the bamboos they are singing a threnody." (Alekar: 31)

The direct address to the audience is complete unlike the traditionally hasty aside. When the narrator says,

"There's the bell, folks.

So take your seats.

We continue to tell folks.

of a man's demise." (Alekar: 47) –

The audience's mind is consciously awakened repeatedly that they are watching a performance in theatre. Bhaurao's soliloquy also addresses the audience directly to guide the judgments and responses of the audience. When Rama is unable to trust that Bhaurao is dead his soliloquy shows his anguish by directly addressing audience.

"Poor thing! What trust? What conviction? She still doesn't believe I am dead. What more can I do? She'll believe it fast enough when the neighborstell her, or when the doctor tells her! But believe me? her husband and lord and master and companion of many years? No way had she never taken my living word for anything; She's not the one to take my dead word either. Well!" (Alekar: 21). Surprisingly she asks what he is saying. And he by directly linking with the audience and coming out of the character says "You didn't hear that. It was a soliloquy. (Alekar: 21) Throughout the play such dialogues are purposefully used, to keep audience's presence with the story and not with attachment with characters.

Illusion is the soul of drama but to take the audience out of this strong traditional consideration Brecht used uniquely Anti illusionistic Devices. As Brecht has used Alekar too uses such devices throughout the play-especially in second Act.

Nana: What if you had fainted or tripped. It would have been all up yours. I tell you. You really were a pain in the arse at the end of the last act. Just as well the act was over, otherwise, I would have had to lift you up on my shoulders and cart you home. (Alekar: 57).

Nana: Bhau I think I'd better exit here (Alekar: 60)

Neighbor 4: Then how about playing 'Last Letter starts the...?'

Nana: No

Neighbor 4: Why not?

Nana: We played that in the first act.

Neighbor 4: How would you know? You enter the play after that!

Nana: I was watching off stage. And besides I was prompting till then.

(Alekar: 71)

Nana: No, No. It's over. I've got it! You go off stage now. (Bhau begins to exit left) No, not there Right. (Alekar: 75)

Nana: The fire has caught Bhau. Heat increases. It's time for the skull to crack.

The frames have woven a frame in which the vague face of a girl is taking on definition. Who knows, there she sits in the dress circle, third from the left. I like her. I can't see her yet but I can see the fly sitting elegantly on that frame. (Alekar: 90)

These dialogues clearly indicate to the Brecht's aim of distancing effect. These strategies are deliberately used to break the difference between reality and illusion and appeal to the audience's alienation.

Alekar makes abnormal things to seen normal throughout the play. The abnormal is never allowed the dimension of monstrosity but is gently and casually naturalized. It may be Bhaurao's playing narrator- commentator role or his comments on neighbor or even moving to visionary and speak over the significance of body and soul-these are to facilitate the insertion of the abnormal in the normal. His coming to life in death with his son Nana at the close of Act one comes naturally from his act long colloquy with audience. Nana's response to Bhaurao continuing to live in death and refusing to be cremated in the new crematorium is completely devoid of shock or surprise. The theatrical sills are used to balance the real and the unreal delicately. When the widowed Rama has to bring her ten days sobbing to an end in order to start cooking rice for making the rice balls to be offered to crows to ensure the release of the soul of the dead, this is registered brilliantly in her sharp shift from sobbing to "wait a minute/ I'm picking over rice/Drat this life! It's all a bore

Nana: All a bore,

All a bore.

I'm still waiting for rice, so hurry up, mother, and open the door.

Mother: I've put the pot upon the fire.

Nana: Where's the rice?

Mother: it'll cook in trice.

Nana: Where's the rice?

Mother: I'm moulding it so nice. (Alekar: 49-50)

Alekar holds real and normal in order. The sequence of special days with their specific rituals in the funerary calendar, e.g. tenth day for offering of the rice balls to the souls of dead, thirteenth day for the feast 'for all those who shouldered the bier; each such occasion throwup a fresh complication in the plot. As the abnormal and the ritual-ceremonial crisscross in a surreal scheme, the sacred turns into the profane, the living and the dead seek romantic union, with shades of forbidden/illicit giving the urge a change of its own. While Bhaurao hopes to talk to Rama, She dreams of her new lord and master, the 'Suit and shades... third from the left among the pal bearers.'

Alekar presents typical society of Pune of the 70's. Throughout the play Alekar describes the conflict of orthodoxy of older generation and new modern approach, point of view of the younger generation that remarkably shows the distance between the generations. The neighbors' treatment to Rama as a widow shows the tradition of treating widows as untouchables,

"Now better take care and close your door

close your door but let in the neighbors,

wake up...

Don't you open a crack

Just sit in the dark

Just sit in the dark
Like a widow black
Wake up.” (Alekar: 27)

On the contrary Rama cannot abide her feelings and dreams of a lover ‘Third from left’. Inter generational politics is more a table for negotiations than a battleground in Alekar’s plays. The compromises they reach nonetheless privilege the new generation. It is left to Nana to fulfill his already dead father’s post-death plea, to be cremated in the closed down crematorium and to keep his father properly hidden and maintained till the mission is accomplished. Moreover he plans the marriage of his mother. Many a times he teases his mother by calling ‘oh shy puss’ or ‘you are blushing’, ‘Naughty’ etc. and sometimes angrily abuses ‘you-lie old lady’. All these are unbearable as far as the background and relationships are concerned. Alekar here is irreverently indulgent, chuckling over the discrepancies and contradictions, going to the point of amusedly appreciating the negotiating skills of the younger generation.

‘*The Dread Departure*’ is a black comedy. Alekar brings a suitable end as for any comedy with the meeting of Rama and Bhaurao as a new lover and she is happy. “My partner for the rest of my life, My prince who will take me away from this block on a white charger.” (Alekar: 78) which will bring happiness to the end. For all practical purposes this is perfect happy ending for the comedy and mother bursts into song to tell the world “I am happy, happy happy” (Alekar: 83). But this play is set at the convergence of real and the absurd so Alekar successfully chooses logical end for this play. “There’s the only one thing to do to stop this family from sliding into a Hindi movie. Cremation.” (Alekar: 84) The cremation involves bribing the watchman to sneak into the closed crematorium, wood, dried dung, Kerosene from the black market and the final waiting for ‘the skull to crack.’ And till then Bhaurao the dead, continues singing. This ends at a positive and practical note. As Nana says, “You will be disappointed, alas! And begin your search to fill your frame all over again. But no! I am not going to reveal to you this secret of Bhau’s. Not if you won’t reveal to me the identity of this third man.” (Alekar: 84). That he means to keep something hidden or secret may be good for others. So leave past into the past and live in the present. Thus the play ends at a very positive and practical note, which will make everything in order and happy.

Thus with the help of Brecht’s distancing effect Alekar has tried to show the bare reality of life in which people are living with wearing a mask to show off others. And Alekar finds his duty to show and tear this mask to view the reality. Bhaurao’s mask as visionary and non-human entity is sufficient to tear of the mask-mask of his wife as a loyal and devoted to her husband, mask of a Son to show his devotion to his parents, and neighbors mask of humanity and dutiousness. The intentional use of *Keertan* as experiment with folk tale achieves alienation effect successfully. We are made aware of what we are watching is drama-a performance and not reality of day to day life. These are enough to show the influence of Brecht and his theory of distancing effect. Death is nodoubt serious, thought provoking, and making a stable mind restless. It has layers of grief and sadness. But Alekar by keeping death to the centre discusses the subject’s overall seriousness and its other side to show contradiction in life and in relation. By using death and rituals of death as subject Alekar not only mocks but attacks on the hypocrisy and dual mindedness of human nature in this modern world. To conclude ‘*The Dread Departure*’ is an extraordinary ‘slice of life’ drama. It is expression of a creative artist who transcends his own self to become a part of the awareness of the society at large. There is not only a mixture of black humor and absurdity but it is stuffed with logical and practical meanings suitable to the contemporary modern time and life and people.

Bibliography:-

1. StyanJ.L. – ‘*Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 3 – Expressionism, and Epic Theatre*’.Cambridge University Press, 1981.
2. Alekar, Satish. ‘*Collected plays of SatishAlekar*’: Oxford University press – Delhi 2009.(15-90)
3. Sarker, Sunil kumar ‘*A Dictionary of Novel*’:Atalantic Publishers, New Delhi – 2010.
4. Abrams M.H., HarphamGeoffrey: ‘*A Glossary of Literary Terms*,Cengage Learning India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi – 2005.
5. Barry Peter, *Beginning Theory*, ‘Viva books Pvt. Ltd. 2010.
6. Yarrow Ralph – ‘*Indian Theatre Theatre of Origin, Theatre Of Freedom*, Curzon press, 2001.

Webliography

1. www.satishalekar.com.
2. www.mumbaiatreguide.com ‘dramas’ / interviews / interview with ReemaGeli.
3. www.livemint.com
4. www.britanica.com

