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Crime and Punishment of the Seductress and Nurturer: Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Garbo*

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Abstract: Mahesh Elkunchwar, with the publication of his first play *Sultan*, made an impressive entry in the scenario of Indian National Theatre. His most critically received and commercially successful plays include: *Holi* (1969), *Flower of Blood* (1972), *Garbo* (1973), *Desire in the Rocks* (1973), *Old Stone Mansion* (1985), which later developed into a trilogy with *Pond* (1992) and *Apocalypse* (1992) *Yuganta*, *Dharmaputra*, and *An Actor's Death* (2005). *Garbo* is about the class of young people like Intuc, Pansy, Shreemanth, and Garbo who are living aimlessly with the shattered dreams equally sustained by the diffusion of mediocrity, and the burden of inhibitions. It is a play about the generation which believes in the dictum of acting out the passion before its feeling. It inherently involves the defiance of living out their own lives with non-conformism for a credo; containing within itself its own seeds of destruction.

Key Words: Mahesh, Garbo, Seductress, Nurturer, Crime, Punishment

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Mahesh Elkunchwar is one of the most influential playwrights from the postcolonial India. So far he has twenty two plays to his credit in addition to the writings on theatre, critical works, and the participation in India's parallel cinema as both an actor and a screen writer. With the publication of his first play *Sultan* he made his impressive entry in the scenario of Indian National Theatre. His most critically received and commercially successful plays include: *Holi* (1969), *Flower of Blood* (1972), *Garbo* (1973), *Desire in the Rocks* (1973), *Old Stone Mansion* (1985), which later developed into a trilogy with *Pond* (1992) and *Apocalypse* (1992) *Yuganta*, *Dharmaputra*, and *An Actor's Death* (2005). Elkunchwar has always taken pride in being based at Nagpur for just over fifty years now, away from Bombay or Pune, the traditional bastions of Marathi drama; that gives him a perspective on the metropolis and the hinterland alike, which is not always available to the metropolitan. It is his off the metropolis prospect that allows him to pick up the characters in his plays who are Munbaikars by chance, outsiders, migrant to the metropolis, brought together by chance, rootless, with rootlessness as their only bond. (Interview)

Garbo is about the class of young people as Elkunchwar describes in retrospect as ‘we young people’ of cities like Kolkata and Mumbai which carried different histories and altogether different culture, but the ‘young people’ in both the cities shared and felt the same frustration of shattered dreams equally sustained by the diffusion of mediocrity, and the burden of inhibitions. It is a play about the generation which believes in the dictum of acting out the passion before its feeling. It inherently involves the defiance of living out their own lives with non-conformism for a credo; containing within itself its own seeds of destruction. In this connection the playwright himself observes:

Suddenly the non conformist among us had decided to shake off all this artificial baggage imposed on us by tradition. At the same time we had realized that we didn't know what to do with the freedom, and we almost abused it. Since we were not equipped to use this freedom creatively or constructively, we began to destroy ourselves in the process. (ibid)

Garbo is about Garbo who is an inspiring actress but ends up doing B- grade films, as she couldn't get good opportunities; Intuc, a college professor; Pansy, the art school dropout; and Shrimant, a small time businessman. The only satisfaction of three male characters' collective life, if it can be called satisfaction at all, lies in their sexual ab- 'use' of Garbo who for these three men happens to be a larger than life, a sex goddess and seductress in positive values. This very labelling of her in terms of sex and sexuality is not depicted superficially merely. But the playwright aims to engage himself in the inner battles of these peoples' sexual behaviour and sexuality. Shrimant says, “In what way is Garbo great? Her business in life has been jumping from bed to bed. She's nothing but a sex machine. (*Pleased with the phrase.*) A sex-machine. Yeah boy! A sex-machine” (16). For Intuc, she is a “challenge. She grows older but never stale. What is it in her that gives her this quality? Maybe she is a great artist, and that helps her to preserve her infinite freshness” (18). Further he adds that Garbo never becomes common. Even after fulfilling the needs of all three, a part of her still remains untouched (19). To Pansy she is a mother figure, and a guardian deity.

But what about Garbo? What does she feel/think about herself? When Garbo arrives on the stage for the first time in their apartment; they are ready to welcome her by canonizing her as a sex-machine, she hits back and sheer out of self contempt terms all this as nonsense. In fact Elkunchwar portrays her as a woman condemned to hopelessness and a deranged mental state on account of thwarted desires and unfulfilled urges. She lives a life of financial insecurity as well as a life which does not get accreditation by established norms of traditional society. Garbo imagines that she is trapped in absurdity with all her strengths and limitations, muddling through meaningless existence. Her pervading sense of loneliness is the result of an anger which enfolds her hatred for a world that compels her to sacrifice herself and render ceaseless routine duties as a sex machine either in the hands of three men or acting in B-grade movies. She rages:

Don't slobber over me like a dog. And don't call me Garbo again either. I don't want any of you to do that. Are you trying to merely flaunt my failure before me? I'm aware of my failure, perhaps better than you. And I'm trying to come to terms with it. I don't claw at people, draw blood, and then dance with demonic joy the way you do. (27)

They try to ease the atmosphere by coming together and participating in a comic pieces of play acting entitled ‘The Slut and Three gentlemen’, and ‘Tatya and Us.’ Even in one of his plays *Party* Elkunchwar depicts a little tragedy. Here spiritual isolation is signified by a comic failure of communication when characters are collectively faced with the reality of life. But soon

they get exhausted and again they are left to sink into a bout of self pity. At this juncture Garbo shocks and startles them by a significant piece of information that she is pregnant, and suddenly it occupies the centre stage. A new *issue* opens up at once. Initially for Shrimant and Intuc, it is a question of shirking responsibility; but faced with their own smallness and cowardice, they make a turnaround, seeking salvation in a collective fatherhood exclaiming in the words of Intuc that:

We are doomed people, we have neither seen, nor experienced, nor created anything beyond filth. Let us grab this opportunity. It's our only hope, our only chance. We will create something beautiful out of this filth. The world will know that there is a life somewhere which is beautiful, pure, fearless, innocent.... And Garbo, we can't achieve this without you. Do you know? Do you know what a tremendous role you have to play? (40)

What a statement? Certainly it promotes and nourishes patriarchal agenda whereby a woman has to live under certain nomenclatures evolved by patriarchy to serve their own ends. They demand from Garbo to play another role; the role of motherhood. But Garbo, though an actor, will not play any other game specially the game of motherhood. And unlike any other ordinary woman to be a mother she has no space to live in the romanticised version of motherhood, and instead knows the consequences of being a mother, and thus expresses her rudimentary doubts:

Of course I do. It's very beautiful and all that. (*Dreamily.*) To be the mother of a beautiful thing. (*Practical.*) But do we have the guts to see the whole thing through? Suppose we suddenly get cold feet? And there are all the other difficulties. If we decide on this I'll lose nearly a year, and all my contracts will have to be cancelled one after the other. What guarantee then of finding work again after the year's over? Not to mention the compensation I'll have to pay to all my producers. And even if I am offered roles later on, how do I know I'll be physically fit to accept them? (40)

She simply wonders when Intuc and Shrimant suggest that she will not work again and some money would be transferred to the name of the child. They try to persuade her further and when they seem to fail; accuse her of having no motherly love. She is raged and answers angrily, "No I haven't. This whole business of motherhood and fatherhood is crass hypocrisy. I am a woman. Just that. A woman who flits from one man to another (41).

This statement of Garbo regarding motherhood pulls her very close to a leading radical feminist Shulamith Firestone who argues that woman is oppressed for her sex, physically characterized by her reproductive ability. Firestone agrees with Engels' opinion regarding power hierarchy of the patriarchal society where males are the owner, and the females the means of (re)production of the children. But unlike economic class, she argues, sex class springs "directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different" (8). At the root of the biological family--the "basic reproductive unit"--Firestone finds that "the heart of woman's oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles" (72). Therefore, she does not approve of those motherhood-positive feminists who hold patriarchal culture for responsibility. Instead, from her physical-materialist perspective, Firestone argues that "it was woman's reproductive biology that accounted for her original and continued oppression" (73).

The visionary spell of their 'own words' and they dream they conjurer up hangs over Act II for a while with Intuc saying, "I can understand now the joy those poor people felt when they saw the new born Jesus in the manger. Garbo is not alone. We all are with her...embracing its sorrows (43-4). But the spell is in the mode of dissipating throughout this act because as Garbo

returning from her shooting informs them that she has lost the child while shooting a stunt scene. She in order to avoid the rage of three men tries to give the whole accident a romantic aura:

The director was almost on the point of tears. Poor thing, he's such kid. (*Pause.*) It was during a camel race. He said he would never have included the shot had he known about me. Poor chap felt terribly guilty. He kept insisting it was entirely his fault. (*Pause.*) But honestly, even I didn't think it would happen. All that jogging up and down on the camel ... So Unnecessary. They could have used my double. But I was so excited ... (*Pause.*) I'm playing the role of a Lamani girl. She's the second heroine. It's a character role. She's terribly fiery, and terribly passionate, this Lamani girl. (*Pause.*) And terribly beautiful.... (48)

The dreams are shattered. The fragile patriarchal community is on the verge of breaking up with Pansy wanting to go home, and Intuc retreating to a cult of filth of which he envisions to come out through the new arrival, but in vain he says:

Let us create our world in filth. And then, the very winds blowing over us will turn our enemies black and blue with their rotten-hate filled breath. We cannot avoid these antagonists now. They are our eternal foes. We need to become very powerful. This is, more rotten. More perverse. Corroded with hatred. (51)

Though what we see in the last scene of the play is a murder where Pansy accuses Garbo to be cheating the three of them and Shrimant plunging a knife into her. This violent act can be related to the patriarchal dominance and violence as seen is always a means to guarantee the dominance and sustenance of the control. Intuc seems to be the only character offering deeper philosophical perspectives on life through his refined talk:

Intuc: Go you remember I once read you my new poems?

Garbo: Oh yes!

Intuc: How fresh and untainted they seemed then.

Garbo: Those days were like that too.

Intuc: Like white flowers gently falling to the ground at the beginning of the rains ... Tender, fragrant, delicate, ready to wilt at the merest touch.... It had been drizzling all morning. I was reading while you stared through the windowpane at the rain outside.... We drank all the coffee sitting wrapped up in a single blanket. And you kept running your fingers through my hair, again and again. (55-6)

In this connection Samik Bandopadhyay observes:

The fragment of memory, set to a different dramatic idiom altogether, seems to offer the ultimate measure against which all the strained gestures and pretences appear all the more inadequate, when they are repeated mechanically once again by all of them in a bizarre farce. The latter inevitably leads to near melodrama, with the animosities and tensions becoming sharper till they culminate in Shrimant stabbing Garbo to death. Melodrama is averted, with the last few lines virtually reconstructing in a minute the charade that looked as if it had been played out once and for all; with Shrimant again angling for Pansy, Intuc finding his rationale, "The blood is real ... Garbo was false", and pansy screaming out for help only to face silence, and entrapment. (Elkuchwar xiv-v)

Samik Bandopadhyay further writes:

The drama in Garbo grows out of a claustrophobic real-life situation pushed to the limits of endurance, burgeoning into a surreal holy dream that is too unreal and brittle to stand the test. But what gives the fantasy its compelling magnetism is the

sheer power of Intuc's words, coming in waves of cynicism, disgust, self-pity, lacerating introspection, flights of sacred vision (xv).

Garbo knows that her scene in the film where she would ride a camel would result in the abortion of the child. Certainly she could have asked the director to use the double but she didn't. She deliberately brings about the death of the child growing in her womb. Garbo's decision to kill the child has ideological groundings. There are at least two ways of looking at the act of abortion. One reason seems to be very clear utilitarian judgment. She cannot earn her livelihood without the job she does in the B grade movies. She does not believe in any kind of future her child would have. In the context of normal social behaviour this reason seems to be a superficial one and many a times this perspective is taken as anti-humanitarian.

Second perspective to look at this act of abortion is the ideology that influences a human mind whereby an individual cannot dare to go 'against the grain.' An individual simply cannot think of going against the established system which is a fortified structure of set of beliefs. Some of these beliefs are invisible; some of them are more obvious; and many of these cannot be recognised by many human beings due to their naturalization. Obviously how can Garbo, a prostitute, think of being a mother? In a traditional society a woman cannot enjoy the privilege of motherhood without following certain rules and regulations. And the first condition, to be a mother, is to initiate in the system of marriage without which one cannot be a mother in spite of the fact that biologically only a woman can be a mother. If one becomes a mother by not following the traditions, the danger is of acceptability, security, and raising because there should be a name; definite name of one man through which not only the woman but the child too also should be known to the rest of the world.

Though Garbo knows that it was Intuc's child, yet she could never live up to the idea of bringing up the child. It is because she knew it well that it was not a simple thing to bear that responsibility since it would result in losing her roles in the movies she was already doing. And thus eventually she would lose the only source of her earning. She knew it well that she was only a „sex machine“ for the trio. It was the combination of the realization what she thinks of herself, what society thinks of her and the trio thinks of her. The presence of the three views mainly affects her illusion and delusion. Human activities and thoughts are governed with ideology which actively functions in every belief and non belief. Garbo seems to be acting in a certain manner as an obvious response to the conformist society. The thoughts of Garbo that ultimately result in decisions and actions are significantly governed by her place in the society and the social structure along with the gender she represents. She is doubly suppressed. She being a woman becomes the victim of male dominated society that exercises its power on female gender to sustain its control upon it.

The murder of Garbo is an attempt on the part of the trio to regain the losing ground of control over the feminine world of pleasure represented by Garbo. They simply could not bear the thought that she killed the infant. Because the child was the only way through which they could give importance to their lives in a specific way. She was already in their control. She was having a comfortable and soothing, to them not to her, image of her in their physical and psychological life until or unless the structure of this constituted world is disturbed by the violent act of Garbo. For Intuc, the foetus of Garbo is an opportunity for a real creation devoid of the false pretence on his part as finds it in his poetry. Thus he loses the only possibility of truly creative thing in its total originality. He also loses the only hope of being meaningful and useful in a philosophical manner. Shrimant loses the last hope and a really meaningful opportunity to tell the world that he is father of the child and in this way he could maintain his position in the

society that he is potent. It is Shrimant who stabs Garbo since he lost the hope against the problem for which Garbo was the only hope. Obviously her murder has nothing to do with the idea that by killing the infant she has committed a heinous crime, and thus she should be punished. Instead she is punished only because her act may further the process of disturbance to the structure of patriarchal authority. Kate Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* draws heavily on allusions from different cultures from China, Indian and Muslim countries which talk about male cruelties against women. The rationale which accompanies that imposition of male authority euphemistically she refers as “the battle of sexes.” This bears a certain resemblance to the formulas of nation at war, where any heinousness is justified on the grounds that the enemy is either an inferior species or really not human at all American attack on Iraq and so many others. The patriarchy mentality has assembled a whole series of rationales about women which accomplish this purpose tolerably well. And these traditional beliefs still invade our consciousness and affect our thinking to an extent few of us would be willing to admit (Millett 46).

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