
UNIT 1 *HALFWAY HOUSE*: READING THE TEXT

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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, Singhania, 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 Singhania 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 Singhania 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). Singhania's elitist pro-American approach has its basis in the class he belongs to. When Savitri entreats Singhania 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). Singhania 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 Singhania 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 Singhania's, 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 Singhania who is viewed by Ashok as an insect and a monster alternatively. We have also noted a sexual innuendo in

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

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