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## UNIT 2 MIDDLE CLASS CONCERNS

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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

In this unit, we shall discuss

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

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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## 2.2 EDUCATED MIDDLE CLASS AND THE FAMILY

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

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

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

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## 2.3 THE TITLE *HALFWAY HOUSE*

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

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

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## 2.4 THE CRISIS IN THE PLAY

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

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

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

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

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

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## 2.5 THE CHARACTERS IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## 2.6 CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*

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

### 2.6.1 The Scope of Individual Freedom in *Halfway House*

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

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

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

### **2.6.2 Male Dominance in *Halfway House***

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

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

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

THE SECOND MAN : (munching noisily) What?

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

THE SECOND MAN : It's delicious!

THE WOMAN : You were kind enough to...

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

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

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

### 2.6.3 The Historical Context

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



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

#### 2.6.4 Conflicting Perspectives in *Halfway House*

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

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

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

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## 2.7 LET US SUM UP

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

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## 2.8 QUESTIONS

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

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## 2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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