
UNIT 3 WOMEN AND SOCIETY

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall consider at length the issue of women's representation in Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* with particular reference to family, neighbourhood and the broader market-oriented world where women bear the burden of oppression at physical and mental levels.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We have read in the earlier units that *Halfway House* is a play that deals with the clash between a man as the master of the household and his wife who is the sole breadwinner in the family. Their respective positions in such a context generate peculiar pressures: Husband Mahendranath feels helpless since he cannot confidently communicate with wife Savitri, and conversely, the wife fails to understand why Mahendranath is so weak from inside that he has to lean again and again on his friend Juneja. The reasons for their peculiar behaviour go far in the direction of the society that assigned gender roles to them – to the man as the strong guiding partner in marriage and to the woman as the weak life-companion expected to confine herself to the home. The ensuing complexity of their relationship is at the heart of this play as we shall see in the following discussion. At first, we take the principle of domestic harmony that each woman in an Indian household is supposed to strive for. This will also give us an occasion to see whether this aspect was in focus in drama alone or it traversed other literary genres, too.

3.2 ISSUE OF DOMESTIC HARMONY IN MOHAN RAKESH'S WRITING

Even though Mohan Rakesh had started writing plays quite early in life (his first play 'Ashadh Ka Ek Din' was conceived and partially composed in the nineteen

fifties), he got recognition as a dramatist only in the late nineteen sixties when popularity came his way through the staging of his third play *Adhe Adhure* translated in English as *Halfway House*. Immediately after the production of this play in 1969, Rakesh became a phenomenon to reckon with in Hindi and a familiar name in the Indian theatre in general. The play was hailed as a masterpiece that indeed brought to centre-stage the issue of middle class existence in post-Independence India. Not exactly forward-looking or 'progressive' in its treatment of the marriage and the home, the play drew notice for its peculiar 'realism' that made the audience sit up and rethink their attitude to relationships within the four walls of the household. In the situation, the boundary of the household seemed not to protect the occupants from the social gaze but became an oppressive agency that worked to the detriment of the weak under its discipline. The people within the household felt anguished but lacked the means to effectively voice their grievance. They assigned no significance to their lot in the overall context of larger social happenings, for reasons that we shall take up in the following discussion. The same aspect of life (linked with the urban middle class) was represented with a keen sense of realism and urgency in Hindi short fiction. We have to keep in mind that Mohan Rakesh had been recognized till the nineteen fifties mainly as a writer of short stories.

3.3 DISINTEGRATING FAMILY AS A MAJOR THEME IN POST-INDEPENDENCE WRITING

The question of strains and difficulties in the family was nothing new to the Hindi short fiction of the nineteen fifties. Short stories dealt with such problems quite seriously and engaged with the increasing disillusionment in life with sensitivity. It had dawned on the writers of the period that the feeling of unease and disquiet in the nineteen fifties had resulted from the inept handling of economic policies and dilutions that India's privileged sections had made of moral and ethical principles with a view to furthering their narrow interests. The weakened idealism of post-Independence India caused a sense of uncertainty and unease in the writers of the day who still looked for inspiration towards the glorious fight the country had given to British imperialism. New developments marked by tough competition and individual progress, however, dampened the spirit of self-sacrifice and collective functioning and made ordinary people wonder whether all was right with the world, so to say. Impact of the said disillusionment could be seen on the life in a joint family that scarcely met the demands of the upwardly mobile middle class.

What struck the depiction of the same theme in theatre was the dramatic presentation of 'ordinary' aspects of life – the drudgery of the home with its day-to-day miseries. It appeared as if the dramatist had held a mirror up to the Indian middle class, literally – the 'ordinary' in life shocked when seen actually happening on the stage that in turn distanced and 'objectified' the mundane. In *Halfway House*, the middle class in India suddenly became an important site upon which larger battles of ideology and socio-economic living were fought. Here, we encounter, for instance, the man-woman clash not merely at the level of ego or temperament but as crucial changes in equation between individuals; the equation in question had a great deal to do with paradigms that unfolded in

the post-imperialist phase of Indian society. This last question would be taken up at length in Unit 5 of this block.

3.4 HOW IS THE MAN-WOMAN QUESTION PRESENTED IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*?

Let us go a bit deeper into the text of *Halfway House*. In this play, Mohan Rakesh has given a good deal of space to the central woman character Savitri. The space has enabled her to articulate her dilemma whether to run her 'house' in its present form or altogether leave it to move from there to an alternative 'home.' Wouldn't the latter decision mean that she is abdicating responsibility towards her husband and the two young children who share this house with her, whereas the third got married but eventually came back to stay with her parents? More importantly, is Savitri in a position to settle down elsewhere with another man? Her bearing the burden of responsibility has two aspects to it: one, being the bread-winner, she feeds people in the household; two, she is a woman because of which fact she has the additional role of keeping things together in the house she inhabits.

It would be in order to have a close look at the way the *Adhe Adhure* was interpreted in the initial stages of its production. The Hindi title was translated as *Halfway House* in English by Bindu Batra who was not only Mohan Rakesh's contemporary but his close associate (1). She was in constant touch with Rakesh in the course of translating the play. This suggests that Rakesh accepted the English title and 'saw' the point made by the translator through the interpretive word *Halfway House*. That is the way the play appeals to almost every reader who appreciates it as an account of the disintegration of the institution of the family in post-Independence India – the play is about the family of Mahendranath and wife Savitri. Whatever Rakesh meant by *Adhe Adhure* in Hindi, he made peace with the idea that the play was substantially about a couple who were not able to live together with comfort under one roof.

The play represents the reality of life in India in the nineteen fifties and reflects the changed social circumstance at the time. Significantly, the traditional mode of the husband active in the outside world and the wife performing the dull mechanical job of running the house is partly reversed in *Adhe Adhure*. More specifically, the two are exposed to the outside pressures of the day in an equal measure. In fact, the seemingly easy arrangement of dividing the human labour into the 'outside' and 'inside' activity had for centuries subjected the female population to passive servility in the four walls of home. The jolt received by the society of post-Independence India with women enjoying parity with men on the strength of education and job that made them an equal participant in social life was indeed severe. Men of that generation felt torn between the principle of equality in life on the one hand and social orthodoxy that subtly worked on the minds of people through the existing patriarchal system on the other – disintegration of the family had a lot to do with this development.

3.5 SOCIAL DIMENSION OF CONFLICTING VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

Let us take up the critical comment made by eminent theatre person and scholar Sanjay Kumar in the context of the perspective that Rakesh gets to project in the

course of the play. To quote: “In its analysis of contemporary society, the play shows a worrying lack of dynamism. Showing a circularity in its ideational movement – a halfway house and its unfinished, incomplete inhabitants, the play rules out the possibility of any kind of collective approach to move out of the mire. Even at the personal, existential level, its characters are in a cul-de-sac and the final message of the play can be one of replicating neo-modernist endorsement of existent structures” (H.H., ed., D. Basu, 134). The comment provides us an entry point to the text that ostensibly seeks to do justice to the situation in which the female protagonist Savitri is placed. We note the institution of the family, for instance, entering a phase of crisis in post-Independence India also got strongly linked up with the emerging system of economic growth and expansion. For an observer of society such as Rakesh, this may have meant rise of individuals on the economic scale merely – a simplistic conclusion but nonetheless ‘real’. If patriarchy pulled men towards rejection of the new ethos and self-assertion as the way to counter women, the tempting ideal of affluence and good living made individual males send their women to schools, government offices, hospitals, etc. as salary-earning staff. The income accruing to the family from women doing jobs made a substantial difference to what was considered the standard of living of the family. This process had been captured to a certain extent in Hindi fiction, but it still remained to be forcefully represented on the stage through drama. Mohan Rakesh seriously engaged with this phenomenon in *Halfway House* where the husband Mahendranath realistically typifies such a male – he doesn’t mind the money but rues that the wife has to go to the office to earn it. Modernity and patriarchy run counter to each other and place the male in a state of dilemma.

There is a peculiar socio-moral dimension to this phenomenon as Mahendranath sees it: he is haunted by the gnawing thought that he is prostituting his wife for gaining a foothold in the respectable world. Here, the typical male psyche is at work which is visited by the ethical unease that the woman provides economic upliftment to the family – the obvious end result of this would be a sense of insecurity in the male. More than middle class, this idea is ingrained in the ethos of capitalism where the appearance of success is more important than success itself. Thus, quality and status in the upper circle assume attractive proportions of wealth that would in the long run multiply itself and become still more valuable – a cycle that would take individual players in its grip and drive them by its own dynamic.

However, Mahendranath does not know the way in which the dilemma of climbing up in social hierarchy and at the same time protecting one’s sense of ‘dignity’ can be resolved. It is not a capitalist family per se (business partnership, negotiations, cold discussions on who gains and who loses, etc.), even as the male protagonist has many a time thought of investing in a business venture. We have on the one side the ambitious male unable to succeed in a business venture and on the other a self-respecting husband drawn backwards to stress the humanist principle of selfhood and dignity. The irony, however, is that the other members of the family, the son and two daughters, do not link their parents with attributes of identity and self-respect; instead they behave as critical bystanders when things hot up in the household. They have the grievance that protection, harmony and peace have always remained away the environs of the household. Add to this the

fact that they have their own small matters to think of where the parents have little role to play, the Mahendranath-Savitri duo stuck through bickering with each other and having no time for the kids. In this sense, the play is indeed about existential efforts of a male to achieve comfort and importance in life and rise in self-esteem. He would brood, look helplessly around since there is no alternative in sight and feel important as a victim. At the same time, however, he lacks the 'manly' capacity to successfully negotiate the world that is wedded to climbing high irrespective of the cost involved in doing so. Clearly, the whole perspective is male-centered. Thus, Savitri's attitude to the existing pressures would have to be defined from a different angle.

3.6 THE WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE IN *HALFWAY HOUSE*

Halfway House could be seen as an endeavour to examine and critique, albeit narrowly, a woman's struggle to assert in face of circumstances that males alone drive and control. It can be said that the paradox surrounding the male is inextricably tied up in *Halfway House* with the potential effort by a woman to express her mind in the situation of a family. In fact, the key word of the dramatic representation in the play is 'situation' that does its disciplining act at the expense of Savitri. Examples of this being a situation are many: the husband in the family wished to make money through a business venture and failed in the plan; the male ego of the husband was damaged in the long process of the failure; the superficially liberal atmosphere of the household led the children to take to anarchic behaviour; the woman in the house, being educated and qualified to work in an office to earn money, flouted the existing norm of remaining stuck to home; the woman protagonist came in contact with men in the outside world and became an object of exploitation at their hands, as she also dreamed of breaking free from the shackles of the family to live independently, etc. All these constitute what have called 'situation' that is given, unmoving and oppressive in the body of the play. Please remember that the male protagonist is confused, sad and answerless in the beginning of the play, the same way he is seen entering the house at the end of the play. In this closed world, Savitri is allowed to quietly dream, feel irritated, become concerned about the future of kids, as also be of help to her husband caught in the dilemma of what can be charitably called modern living. The brunt of the situation is borne obviously by the female protagonist.

Let us consider the married woman's interpretation of the aforementioned situation from a slightly different angle. The wife Savitri married Mahendranath as much for liking him from a distance (this is what courtship before marriage meant in India in the nineteen fifties) as for seeing him in terms of an equal partner in life. Under the binding values of patriarchy, this included the perennial worry of a woman that her husband may not belong to her in the sense in which she belonged to him, entirely and exclusively. Whereas the female leaves her home and hearth as well as all those who 'related' to her really closely, the male owns and controls that territory to which the woman goes and which she occupies as a subordinate. This would sound quite simple at present but at the time Mohan Rakesh wrote the play, the situation would leave an upwardly mobile woman deeply anguished. She felt truly threatened that the husband quite acceptably moved around in

male company where he observed gentle and cultured ways since the circle consisted of equals but turned different vis-à-vis the wife at home. Was he at fault for doing so? The educated woman of the nineteen fifties would think this to be the case. On being called Mahendranath's wife by her husband's friend, this is how Savitri articulates her serious grievance to him. I quote the speech in more or less its entirety:

Don't call me that [a wife] – Mahendra is also a man, with a family ... a fact that those who were close to him never liked from the start. By getting married he almost seemed to have snatched something away from you, 'Mahendra no longer laughs as he used to' ... 'He's no longer the Mahendra he used to be!' ... And Mahendra's life-struggle has been to somehow remain what he used to be. So that no one would be able to say that he has changed. That is why he's so frustrated – bangs his head against the wall – bullies the children – beats up his wife ...! His friends need him to pass their leisure hours. No party is right without Mahendra. No picnic is fun without Mahendra. His main job is to keep his friends happy. And not only is it *his* main job, but I should also be the only concern of his family. 'How can you refuse to go there?' ... 'You think you're an educated woman' ... 'You don't even know how to behave!' He wants to change the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I ... That same Mahendra who smiles meekly among his friends when he comes home. One never knows when he may scratch one's eyes out or drink one's life-blood! One day he makes a bonfire of his clothes in anger. Another day he sits on my chest and bangs my head against the floor. 'Tell me whether you'll come with me or not? Whether you'll do all I say or not?' But I still don't do what he wants. I still don't conform. I hate all this – I hate it. I want ... a man, not just a miserable ... hanger-on! Sometimes I try to wrench my tortured being away from him. There was even a time when I tried to turn to him into a man. But if my efforts ever began to bear fruit, his friends started pitying him. 'Savitri is leading Mahendra by the nose!' 'Savitri has broken him ... he is no longer a man.' Just a puppet ... Poor Mahendra! (The emphasis and the gaps are in the original). (2)

This speech is important on two counts – one, it is apparently made by the female protagonist and thus presents her point-of-view; two, conversely, it betrays the male construction through the mimicry that is inherent in the representation. In fact, the two are so well-joined in its final form that the speech becomes a multi-layered account of the situation we intend to analyze.

In this quotation, why does Savitri initially resist being called the 'wife'? Is it that she dreamt of a special home from where she would actively engage with the world she is born in and where she would have a place of her own? If we take that to be the truth, Savitri accepts the fact of patriarchy and considers the institution to be friendly to her interests as a woman. Being a wife in this sense is not as significant as being a part of the social establishment consisting of husband, children and neighbours with whom she would have fulfilling relations. Her being possessive about Mahendranath also reveals this aspect of her understanding of the world. She seems to be competing with her husband's friends for gaining control over him – how she wishes he would remain away from the friends and be in his company 'smiling' as 'meekly' as he does with others! To a great extent, Savitri is out and out a patriarchal soul, accepting the given arrangement and

pursuing her path of gaining control over the household including the husband. That is why she is bitter with Mahendranath's friends, they come in the way of her effort to capture the house to run it after her heart. This perspective, ironically, works to the detriment of Savitri's own interests as a person and citizen. The ethic of the home to which she subscribes more or less entirely would enslave her being and impose on her the role of wife, or the woman of the house. She would not have realized this issue but for the fact that she works for a living in the office – representing the outside world that bears the stamp of equality among co-workers. Relative independence at the place of work is enjoyable and appealing; it gives Savitri a different sense of fulfillment, modern as well as creatively satisfying. The distinctive feature of this fulfillment is individual gain. Savitri herself creates points of opportunity to meet colleagues and see them for what they are. Her alliance with Jagmohan being of a piece with it, she fantasizes to move to his place and walk free from the family she left behind in the morning. Is it objectionable? Patriarchal gaze would certainly find it unacceptable and bring in questions of loyalty, commitment, duty, etc. These, as is known, drive the family institution and expect the woman to adhere to them. If we look closely at the speech quoted above, we would see clear hints of this complex working of patriarchy in the background of Savitri's utterances. Thus, patriarchy puts Savitri in the dock in spite of the fact that she herself articulates her grievance to Mahendranath in this speech.

One could also note a streak in Mahendranath to make his wife conform to what he considers the right kind of behaviour. Savitri quotes her husband saying, "You think you are an educated woman? ... you don't know how to behave ...". This way, the situation compels him to become a carrier of the views and preferences of his male friends. The woman in Savitri cannot easily take this since she asserts the right to be what she is. Her resistance to Mahendranath's effort at making her behave in true manner of an educated woman fails since she chooses to reject a conformist code. This turns the husband violent. Isn't such violence indicative of a hidden male agenda under which the woman is denied the right to run her life inside the family the way she wants? It would come particularly heavily on a woman who works outside the home.

But how could she imagine matrimony to be the agency that would be partial to her and open out to her individual fancies? This question is relevant keeping in view the above discussion about the occasions that her job creates for her individual freedom. As suggested, Savitri has failed to grasp the essence of matrimony as a full-scale package, a contract in which not just the male (husband) is to call the shots but the whole lot of males supporting the primary male (husband again) are to actively assert themselves as the patriarchal authority ("By getting married he almost seemed to have snatched something away from you", says Savitri). Thus, getting married for Savitri is to associate herself with the husband and his friends from the subordinate position of an outsider who appeared on the scene on terms set by the already established structure of the family. Isn't she a 'refugee' in Mahendranath's home? This is one side of Savitri's problem. Another is that her husband, her partner in marriage is also subject to the rules governing the larger world. Is there a point where the husband-wife duo could meet and see prospects of a joint struggle against a common enemy? We shall see this aspect in the next part of the analysis.

3.7 THE MALE AS A VICTIM OF SOCIETY OF HIS TIME

It is difficult to also overlook the fact that Mahendranath is frustrated not as much in marriage as in the competitive ethos that prevails outside the home. How would Savitri cope with this aspect of the society of which she is an important (productive) member? She has a stake in the running of her world as an employee. In this sense, that world of which Mahendranath feels to be the victim has entered the portals of this house through his own wife Savitri. He has to bear the brunt of competition from his own wife. She is sanctified by a renewed patriarchy unless the present social systems fought it consciously. Even as she is a subordinate partner in the matrimonial arrangement, Mahendranath cannot subdue her in his own home. With no settled job or a regular source of income, he is bound to play second fiddle to her. The irony is compounded this time by Savitri who now wishes that Mahendranath make a grade in the world and let her have all those comforts enjoyed by successful people. Her grouse with this husband is that he is not a man but a hanger-on (“I want ... I want a man, not just a miserable ... hanger-on!”). She also has this feeling of her own failure in the case because of which she says self-pityingly that “There was even a time when I tried to turn him into a man.” The speech in its totality presents the family as a hostile formation of which Savitri is a helpless victim in spite of her best efforts to turn it into an instrument used by her to promote her narrow interests. The irony persists that the speech that began with “Don’t call me that [a wife]” ends with “Just a puppet ... poor Mahendra!” The two could perhaps sympathize with each other and together look critically at their surroundings. There would be a chance here to bridge the male-female divide and place the husband and wife together against bigger forces at work outside the home. Let us not forget that Mahendranath has lost in the bigger battle away from home: his friends Juneja and Jagmohan succeeded where he failed. Curiously, Rakesh presents in *Halfway House* the male-male bonding and shuns intricacies of social dynamics in which many fail and some succeed. Also, those who succeed in the emerging world cling to their male friends in the name of solidarity (with men) under patriarchy but seldom care to protect the nuclear family they are supposed to run with commitment. Most of the difficulties visiting the *Halfway House* emanate from this careless handling by the male, who might as well have stuck as a middle class householder to the children and wife and gave them supportive company.

3.8 VIEWING POSSIBILITIES OF AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM

There is a third aspect to Savitri’s speech also that takes it outside the purview of her individual suffering. Savitri’s apparently personal statement against her husband has a broader sociological bearing – it reads more like an articulation of a complex response to a social issue with separate points explored and analyzed. In this sense, Savitri is not an individual but a person who typifies the social trend of asking too much from an institution than one gave it – a kind of unfair demand made on a social collective. In the same manner, Mahendranath becomes a symptom of a general social malady caused by the internal logic of interests that govern larger life. Can individuals, howsoever talented, dynamic and

motivated, do anything truly effective against such odds and hit upon an alternative paradigm? More, is the writer really interested in exploring or evolving such a paradigm? As a young man, Rakesh had been witness to an important phase of the National Movement and could, therefore, be expected to search for answers that were at least compatible with the values of that movement. Instead of extending the values in question, he chose to adopt the individualist competitive logic of capitalism in free India. Sidestepping history as a guide to intervention in a different phase, Rakesh elected to adopt the present-centered sociological paradigm, under which things were to be merely interpreted for the benefit of the audience. Sharing with readers/ audiences the pains and sufferings of the day was found sufficient enough through the medium of literature. Sociological logic does not leave scope for an enterprise committed to general good, since at the root of individual motivation in such cases lies the determining reality of a given world. Helplessness being the end result of such a fight between individuals on one side and the governing logic of an existing society on the other, we finally accept conclusions such as “Just a puppet ... poor Mahendra!”

All the three aspects of the speech by Savitri discussed above lead us to the conclusion that Savitri in fact does not have a say in the matter – the task assigned to her by the writer is to merely externalize her inner confusion and anguish in face of an insurmountable problem. Should we not expect the playwright to have related Savitri with broader social trends where she could engage herself a bit positively and find a way to assert herself as a working person? Her helplessness seems depressing, uncharacteristic of an intelligent woman capable to see through strategies that males generally adopt to control them. In this, the play as theatre also brings forth quite clearly the high-strung nature of Savitri’s utterances in the speech quoted above – she pauses meaningfully, fumbles to find words appropriate to her feelings and goes silent every now and then to recover breath. Obviously, she hasn’t thought over the issues that her interlocutor, The Fourth Man, has brought forth to draw her into the conversation and force her to say what he could later manipulate to his advantage. As theatre, *Adhe Adhure* merges entirely with the dramatic intention of the author out to give five men and a single woman chance to sort things out vis-à-vis each other. Mark the fact that the fight is of five against one and thus the result is a foregone conclusion. The speech provides an argument to Savitri’s opponents to stay merrily in their well-protected positions of social power and familial dominance.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have considered gender subjugation through an analysis of Savitri’s predicament in *Halfway House*. This gave us an opportunity to examine some broader aspects of the emerging social scene in post-Independence India. Patriarchy and family were the other areas that came under discussion from the point of view of women who bore pressures from these institutions even as they revealed their own concrete responses to them.

3.10 QUESTIONS

1. Write a critical note on the way Savitri confronts her husband Mahendranath in *Halfway House*.

Mohan Rakesh: *Halfway House*

2. How is patriarchy reflected in Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House*? Explain.
3. What is role of family in the life of a middle class woman in our times? Discuss with particular reference to Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House*.

3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Agrawal, Pratibha, *Mohan Rakesh*, New Delhi: Sahitya, 1987.

Taneja, Jaidev, *Mohan Rakesh: Ranga, Shilpa aur Pradarshan*, New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1996.



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