

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND THE ROLE OF THE PROTAGONIST IN MAHESH
ELKUNCHWAR'S *GARBO***

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Elkunchwar is one of the most phenomenal playwrights in Marathi literature. He has shown the grave reality of society through the lives of protagonists in his plays. He presents a clear picture of the social problems faced especially by women and depicted the same via the female characters. *Garbo* is both the title of the play as well as the name of the protagonist. In this play Elkunchwar has brought the characters alive through his powerful characterization. His plays are driven by the plight, grief, emotional complexities, hopeless undesirable predicaments, sexual politics between men and women and societal issues like man-woman relationships, patriarchy, deterioration of moral values and human bondage. The characters in this plays are the reflection of the bourgeois society.

KEYWORDS: Social problem, *Garbo*, motherhood, sexuality, mentality.

INTRODUCTION

The plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar present a grim picture of post modern socio-cultural existence at the backdrop of post-independent India. He experiments with many forms of dramatic expressions which can be observed in his works. His fame has spread beyond the boundaries of Marathi theatrical circle due to his exceptional storytelling that can be evidently seen in his plays. He is regarded as a highly dignified playwright in the growth of modern Indian theatre. His first one-act plays *Sultan* and *Holi* were published in the prestigious literary magazine of *Satyakatha*. The same plays were produced by Vijaya Mehta for Rangayan in Bombay in 1970. He delved into themes such as death, loneliness, and the purposelessness of life. With the publication of his first play *Sultan*, he made an impressive entry in the scenario of Indian National Theatre. The translations and

interpretations of his works within Indian languages made his plays reach a wider audience. In all the plays the characters represent not just the harsh reality but also hold a mirror to the society they belong to. He can make the audience ponder with the way his characters use their sexuality and emotions to communicate their rage as well as their helplessness.

A social issue (also called a social problem, social illness or social conflict) refers to an issue that influences and is opposed by a considerable number of individuals within a society. It is often the consequence of factors extending beyond an individual's control and local geographical environment. In some cases, a social issue is the source of a conflicting opinion on the grounds of what is perceived as a morally just personal life or societal order.

This article deals with the protagonist Garbo's life and the social problems in Mahesh Elkunchwar's play *Garbo*.

The main theme of *Garbo* is the meaningless life that young people live in our contemporary society, devoid of social and ethical values. The young people are portrayed as rebels against imposed customs, traditions and norms. The playwright talks about the frustrations, psychological stress, consequences faced by individuals when acted out of passion and without further thoughts on the situations ahead. It is also about the misuse of the freedom by individuals which sows the seeds of their own destruction. This play revolves around an aspiring actress Garbo. Lack of good opportunities forces her eventually to end up doing B grade films. She is the object of mere physical pleasure, a sex goddess and seductress. She lives with three men - Intuc, a college professor, Pansy, the art school dropout and Shrimant, a small time businessman. And these three men merely use her for their sexual satisfaction with no genuine affection for her. These men have different attitude towards her. For Shrimant she is merely a sex machine, giving him sexual satisfaction. Intuc observes her as a living work of art while Pansy sees her as an older sister. Here, the playwright exposes the inner battles of sexuality, mentality and physical desires experienced by each of the characters of the play.

Shrimant says, "In what way is Garbo great? Her business in life has been jumping from bed to bed. She's nothing but a sex machine. A sex-machine. Yeah boy! A sex-machine. (16) For Intuc, she is a "challenge. She grows older but never stale. What is it in her that gives her this quality? Maybe she is a great artist, and that helps her to preserve her infinite freshness" To Pansy she is a mother figure, and a guardian deity.(18)

This is how Garbo is viewed through the eyes of the three men she is involved with. But how does Garbo perceive herself? What does she truly feel or think about herself? The men in her life admire her as mere sex machine that they are used to. Elkunchwar paints her as a despondent woman with unfulfilled desires and torn apart from the social obligations. She leads a life where she is

financially insecure as well as a life that is never accepted by the traditional society. She feels that she is caught in this useless mess with no way out. Her loneliness and hatred towards the world is evidently captured by Elkunchwar. She lives in the type of a world that has forced her to earn livelihood by being a sex machine or an actress in B – grade films.

Garbo once terrifies the men by sharing the news of her pregnancy. This news is received differently by each one of them. Shrimant and Intuc are shocked by this entire situation but eventually tried to take advantage and credit in the form of collective parenthood as they are faced with cowardice and feeling of insignificance crept over their lives. As Shrimant is impotent and badly wanted to prove his manhood to the society, he views this as an opportunistic situation. They sugarcoat their words to convince Garbo to have the child for their own benefits as shown in the below excerpt:

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

Now that Garbo has to deal with her pregnancy, the men in her life demanded her to play the role of motherhood which was alien to her. She had to take decisions that best suited her life as well as promising future of her child too. Unlike other ordinary women who have their fancied version of motherhood, Garbo had no such motherly thoughts. Yet again Garbo was no other ordinary woman. She faced varieties of hurdles in every stage of her life which made her impervious to such beautiful dreams and thoughts. She is not filled with ignorance either, for she knows the consequences one has to face during and after pregnancy. Motherhood is the epitome of sacrifice, pure joy and love given completely and selflessly by a mother to her child. She understood this and she knows only

too well that she is incapable of providing everything a child needs. When a child comes into the world, there is no going back. A huge compromise needed to be done as this is a severe blow to her career of acting in B – grade films.

Garbo is unwilling to compromise her motherhood to her career as her being an actress is the only source of income for her livelihood. Neither did she believe the kind of life her child would have. There is a scene in the movie where she had to ride a camel. Doing this scene would certainly bring about the death of a child growing inside her womb. Well aware of the fact that this leads to abortion, she went for this role and deliberately brought death of her child. She made this decision as she saw no solution other than abortion in her petty life.

In the society where women live, there are many rules and regulations to be adhered to, particularly more by women. The institution of marriage always comes first before the parenthood. A single motherhood or a motherhood before marriage is deeply frowned upon in the society. Though biologically only a woman can be a mother, she has no right for her individual decision of motherhood before marriage as the society favors patriarchy and the decisions are taken for the women which are in man's favor.

Can Garbo ever come to agreeing terms with being a mother? Would she be able to raise a child on her own? Will that be acceptable in the society? And for a child to grow, the most essential aspect is the presence of family which fulfills all the needs of that child. Will Garbo and the men living with her be able to provide the family to a child? How will society accept this arrangement even if provided? All these issues seemed too hard for Garbo to deal with. She knew that the child inside her womb was Intuc's. But the idea of upbringing the child felt horrifying to her given the circumstances of her social status as an actress in B – grade movies. What society thought about her and what the three men in her life thought about her, impacted on what she thought about herself. Her actions are controlled by the opinions and perceptions of the society and of men. Amidst all this apprehension, she decided that the only solution to this whole situation is abortion.

She becomes the ultimate victim in this mess when she is stabbed by Shrimant as he is very outraged by this decision of abortion. Shrimant, Intuc and Pansy thought that the only solution to end their meaningless lives and to start a life afresh was through Garbo's child. Intuc believed this child to be a blessing of real creation unlike his poetry. Shrimant lost all the hopes he had to prove his manhood to the whole world, for he was impotent to beget a child. With his so-called credibility vanished, he stabs Garbo as she brought an end to his dreams and expectations. This scenario tells everyone upto what lengths men can go to achieve their greed and superiority over women. If woman goes her own way without man's considerations, he reminds her how the society works favoring his directions. Garbo was not allowed to have her own decisions on her life. Her life was controlled by these three men. Can she not decide what suits her the best in her life? Is a woman's life always to be controlled by a man?

This play doubtlessly shows that the women are suppressed by the ruthless men and male – dominated society from taking the most important decisions pertaining to their own lives and the social problems faced by them.

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