

Original Article

Communication Breakdown as a Cause of Family Disintegration in *Halfway House* by Mohan Rakesh

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ABSTRACT: *Halfway House* is one of the most remarkable landmark plays in Modern Indian drama that explores the themes of identity and meaning have been explored. The crisis of identity and breakdown of communication in human relations, and the resultant tragic effect of boredom and despair. The article examines how ineffective communication, emotional alienation, and a lack of mutual understanding lead to splitting within the family. By analyzing characters' interactions, dialogues, and silences, the article argues that communication failure is not merely a symptom but a chief cause of familial disintegration. Finally, the article is on human nature and its complexities, viewed as an exploration of meaning and identity in the turmoil of changing social and familial structures.

KEYWORDS: *Despair, Alienation, Tragedy, Turmoil, Miscommunication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The characters constantly refer to the past to understand the roots of their frustration in the present. In other words, the present seems to be haunted by the ghost of the past. So there is more talking than action in the present. The principle of indirection may be seen in the revelation of characters' hidden motives also. This is an epistemological problem in the play. Almost all characters in the play do not reveal their nature through their actions, but are revealed or interpreted by others. Mahendra is interpreted or explained by Savitri. Binni is explained by Savitri and by the Boy. Kinni is explained by the boy and vice versa. Mahendra and Savitri are explained by Juneja. Many times these explanations or interpretations are exaggerated or negated on account of their own subjective prejudices and eccentricities. Everyone explains the other from their own point of view and never has the willingness or imagination to interpret the other from the other's point of view. Thus, they come out with half-truths and are incapable of arriving at the whole truth of the family. Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* (1969) is a post-independence Indian middle-class psychological study of incomplete selves, often read as a social critique of society, and also functions as a sharp examination of broken relationships. The play's very title, "*halfway house*", names a condition of *halfness*, a *liminal* state where characters are never fully present, fully satisfied, or fully integrated into their marriages, families, or selves.

2. DISCUSSION

Halfway House may be described as an existential play in the Indian context. It offers a picture of the decadence of a bourgeois family in a metropolis of twentieth-century India. It shows the disintegration of the institution of marriage and family and hints at the various factors contributing to the negative process. The extended metaphor of the house is built up throughout the play. Generally speaking, a house is a place where the blood relatives live together peacefully, harmoniously, and such a house is indeed heavenly.

Right from the beginning to the end of the play, the picture of the house projected by the dramatist is a negative one. As we proceed with the reading or watching of the play, various aspects of reality begin to show up before our eyes. The entry of the woman into the house after her return from the office sets the negative tone. Obviously, she returns tired after a day's work in the office and easily feels irritated to know that the house is not kept clean and tidy: "Whenever I come back the house is in a mess" (P.7). The initial dialogues of the first scene itself reveal the abnormality of the nature of the house.

Savitri is unhappy with her husband for not being practical in his business partnership in the past. She complains that he was made to invest some money in a company with his partner, Juneja, but ultimately suffered a great loss, though Juneja had his usual profit. Mohan Rakesh indirectly shows the evils of modern business partnerships, uncertainties of profit and the risk involved in the whole system. In a way, Mahendra easily brings to our mind Willy Loman of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Like Loman, Mahendra is also a failure in life and undergoes an experience of metaphorical death. That is the reason why he complains that nobody cares for or respects him in the house and that he is used as a 'mere stamp of respectability.' He says sadly as well as angrily, "I am of no use, of no use at all. I'm only an idler ...to be kicked and bullied just as you please. Can anyone tell me why I should stay here?" (P.26). Thus, being an economic nonentity in the family makes him suffer from a feeling of estrangement. "I am responsible for ruining my life, your life, all our lives: And I still stick to this

house, because I'm a parasite, because I like living off my wife" (P.27). He suffers from a sense of constant humiliation in the family. One may easily notice the irony involved in his name. 'Mahendra', which means the Great Lord Indra, *the mythical god known for all wealth, luxury and glory, provides a sharp contrast* to the present penury of the character in this play. He is known for his utter poverty, humiliation and helplessness.

Poverty dogs the family in many details. For example, the younger girl complains that she has no money to spend on her tiffin, "If I am hungry in school, I've no money to buy anything. And at home it takes hours to heat the milk" (P. 20). Likewise she complains that she does not want to be insulted by her teacher for not taking the skeins of thread to the school, "The same thing happened once again in the needle-work class. Miss said... If you don't get me the skeins of thread today either, I won't go to school any more. Miss told me in front of the whole class..." (P.21). The younger girl is thus unhappy with her mother for not providing the necessary comforts and amenities of life. The unhappiness of the girl is, obviously, ascribable to the overall poverty of the family. The boy quit college halfway through and got a job with Air Freeze Company. But he left his job within six weeks. Now he has been leading a jobless life like his father, becoming a burden on the family. He buys a tin of cheese mainly because he can buy it on credit, and even makes a phone call on credit. Thus, the economic burden of the family is aggravated by the joblessness of two men in the house. That explains why the mother feels the pinch very acutely. "The burden of this house is so great that I need someone to share it with me. I can't manage it alone. Your father lost all our money, and has been idle ever since" (P.41). It is in order to lighten the economic burden that she invites his boss Singhanian ...to her house and requests him to help her son to get a suitable job. Thus, the entire family is paralysed by the economic deficiency and consequently converted into a metaphorical 'hell.'

The economic factor has indirectly given rise to the other problems in the family. Unlike the traditional housewife who is confined to her home and is obedient to her husband, Savitri in this play is educated as well as employed. The position of a working woman has given her the right to assert herself. Being a new woman and a city-bird, she wants to have sexual promiscuity, which is not enjoyed by the traditional Hindu wife. Although she invites her boss Singhanian to her house under the pretext of requesting him for a job for her son, her behaviour is not approved by her husband or by her son. The boy does not want to get a job through the mother's boss, "I don't want a job. Not through that fellow anyway" (P.28). He dislikes Singhanian for various reasons. Among the notable reasons, two can be seen. The boy dislikes him because "he doesn't even have the sense to button up his trousers after" 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" (P.29). Like a modern liberated woman, Savitri does not believe in the sanctity of chastity. Her sexual promiscuity is combined with her ambition. She is deeply interested in material comforts, status, position and wealth. That is the reason why she had four lovers in the past. She always felt the blatant temperamental incompatibility with her husband and therefore sought the company of other men like Juneja, Shivjeet, Manoj and finally Jagmohan. Juneja narrates the history of Savitri's extramarital life very clearly, "...it was obvious even then that you didn't consider Mahendra to be the man with whom you could spend your life, every year you've tried to free yourself by looking around for another man. In the beginning, I was one of these men. After me, you were enamoured of Shivjeet, his university degree, his trips abroad, or whatever. In reality, he was interested in you only because he was not Mahendra. Then you met Jagmohan. You admired him for his excellent contacts, his smart way of life, his generosity" (P.73). But in spite of having these love affairs, Savitri was never happy with any of them, nor did she stick to any one of them. Savitri was indeed shocked when her own lover, Manoj, married her daughter Binni. Her affairs with different men are strongly resented by Mahendra and her son. So far, she has not shown the courage of eloping with any one of her lovers. But now that Jagmohan, her last lover, has come back to Delhi, she wants to go away with him for good. The son, who is fed up with her oscillation between marital and extramarital loyalties, wants the matter to be decided once and for all. "High time the situation changed. I want the whole business to be decided one way or the other" (P.45-46). But the problem is not to be solved so easily, because of the complex nature of life itself. When Savitri desperately goes out with Jagmohan and requests him to accept her as a life-partner, he refuses to do so on account of his position, her children and many other obstacles. Thus, her route of escape from the matrimonial hell is mercilessly blocked by her fate. She is condemned to continue her life in the matrimonial hell, much against her will. The frustration is caused by the sense of incompleteness of her husband. Like her husband, she also provides a sharp contrast to the mythical Savitri, who wanted to save her husband from the clutches of death. Unlike the mythical figure, Savitri constantly quarrels with and complains against her husband.

Whereas Savitri has suffered from not taking a drastic step in her extramarital affairs, her elder daughter Binni has been suffering for taking a very drastic step in eloping with Manoj, the lover of her own mother, thereby aggravating the suffering of the mother. In spite of marrying a man of her choice, she has not been able to get along with him. Unable to live with him any longer, she has returned to the parental home, thereby adding to the anxiety and liability of the family. Thus, both mother and elder daughter provide two extremities of sexuality but share in the suffering qualitatively.

Sexual curiosity or obsession seems to be an important ingredient in the make-up of the young people in the family, perhaps because of the wrong models provided by the mother and the elder daughter. This aspect of the family holds a mirror to the slackening of Hindu morality in the changing urban society of India. If the elders indulge in sexuality openly, the younger ones

do so secretly or vicariously. For example, Kinni reads the *Memoirs of Casanova* on the sly by stealing it from her elder brother. Likewise, she is interested in discussing with her friends the sex lives of others' parents. Similarly, the son has been trailing behind a girl called Varna working at the Udyog Centre.

Besides the economic and sexual problems, the temperamental differences among the members of the family aggravate the unhappiness of the family. Savitri, for example, is a very ambitious woman who wants her husband to be a strong man, successful in his business, earn a lot of money for the family and be a glamorous person. She, therefore, complains that Mahendra has no personality, strength of character or self-confidence. She explains it to Juneja, "Let me tell you about the reality I know. Why does one get married? In order to fulfil a need, an inner void, if you like, to be self-sufficient, complete. But that's not why Mahendra got married! The object of his existence is as if he were there only to fill in the gaps in the lives of others..." (P.69). But when she is disappointed with him, she tries to seek those things in her lovers. But even there, she has not been able to have a lasting relationship because of the uncertainties and contingencies of middle-class life. She has a bit of *Lady Macbeth's* ambition in her, but like a Lawrentian heroine, she goes on searching for perfect matrimonial happiness, but gets frustrated at every step. She is not able to solve the problem of her life by overcoming her ambition and desire for pomp and glory and by accepting the contingencies of life with a sense of yogic resignation. Far from accepting her fate and making the best of the reality of her life, she pines for what is not. When she cannot escape from the bondage of matrimony and family, she suffers from a sense of being trapped in it. The Hindu philosophy teaches the great lesson that when the objective world cannot be changed, one has to make one's own life meaningful only through subjective change and sublimation of desires. Savitri is obviously incapable of such adjustment in life because of her plaintive temperament. The objects of her complaint may change, but the complaint itself does not change. It is this negative approach of Savitri which is pointed out by Juneja, "Whether you were a child or not, you used to speak in the same way you do now. That day you pulled Mahendra to bits, you said he was a wimp, had no backbone. But the names of the people who had made him so were different then. You put the blame on his parents" (P. 72). Juneja further analyses her mind very clearly, "The point is that if any of these men had been a part of your life instead of Mahendra, you would still have felt that you had married the wrong man. You would still have encountered a Mahendra, a Juneja, a Shivjeet, or a Jagmohan and thought and reacted in the same way 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..." (P.74). Savitri's search for completeness or over-ambition is comic as well as tragic at the same time. She has to experience a sense of protest and a sense of helpless submission at the same time and has no courage either to have a sublimated reconciliation with her fate or to snap her relationship with the family. She, therefore, remains an embodiment of frustration.

The same temperamental hauteur can be seen in her elder daughter, Binni, also. But there is a slight difference between their modes of action. Whereas Savitri & Binni are Shakespearean characters, a tendency. Binni has been bolder than her mother in taking quick and hasty decisions and consequently suffering for them. After having married Manoj, lover of her mother, she has come back to her parents as she could not get on well with her husband due to temperamental incompatibility and *Catherine Earnshaw*-like defiance. As she herself explains it, "He speaks with such assurance that I start despising myself. I feel like smashing everything around me, like defying him in a way that would enrage him. He likes my hair long, so I want it cut. He doesn't like me to work, so I want a job. Anything to torment him: But I can't do it. And when I realise this, I feel so crushed that I cut myself off from him for days on end" (P.19). But in spite of being bolder than her mother, Binni suffers from being trapped in the mechanical repetition of the pattern of frustration. "But then, slowly, we start treading the same weary path. Everything happens in the same way until we reach the same abyss once again" (P.19). Binni, like her mother, is trapped in the emotional hell of the family. The cause of Binni's frustration and estrangement is to be sought in the subjective world rather than in the objective world. "What reason? A cup of tea spilt from his hand or a short delay when he returns from work? These little things are not really reasons; they become reasons. A strange sort of feeling mounts up within me and spreads like poison through my whole being. Everything I touch or see or hear becomes distorted, and I stand helpless and fearful under the spell of a destructive fate. But Mama, I don't know why I just can't see why! It happens unasked, unforeseen. It tortures me till I think I'm going mad. And in the end? In the end, he took turns against me and said that it is from the house I have taken something with me, which prevents me from being natural" (P.17-18). Binni, like her mother, puts the blame on the house or on others in moments of anger. But the cause of their defiance and desires is rooted in themselves, in their blood and temperament, although they are not able to understand or own it.

Like the elder girl, the younger girl is also adamant and defiant in nature and therefore adds to the irritability of the domestic atmosphere. Kinni is very cheeky and argues with elders disrespectfully. She complains about her loneliness in the house after her return from school when nobody is there to talk with her. When her mother asks her why she tore the book, she answers disrespectfully. "It got torn. What can I do? The same thing happened again in the needlework class" (P.21). When the mother suggests that they can talk about it later on, she retorts, "You're always telling me to talk later on" (P.21). When the mother talks disdainfully about her and her Miss, she snaps. "Then why don't you take me out of school? I could also loaf around all day like Shoki" (P.21). Instead of addressing her elder brother as Ashok, she calls him Shoki. That is the reason why the elder girl complains about her, "Mama, you really have turned her into a cheeky little brat!" (P.21). She refuses to go to school on some pretext or another and reports the secrets of Ashok to the parents. Similarly, she has a habit of scandal-mongering and

discussing sexual matters with her friends like Surekha, thereby earning the wrath of their parents. She starts crying when people do not oblige her. When somebody calls her a child affectionately, she retorts, "Yes... I'm a big girl, sometimes I'm told I am a child, sometimes a big girl" (P.61). She calls her elder sister and other members of the family "lumps of clay" and exhibits her mannerlessness and hysterical behaviour. She is, therefore, slapped by the mother and locked in a room. But she also bolts the door from inside to rebel against her mother. Kinni is thus a typical representative of adamant and cheeky girls who are uncontrollable and who aggravate the tension in the family and make the domestic hell more intolerable than it normally is.

Mahendranath also suffers partially due to his peculiar temperament. Though once upon a time he was a successful business partner, now he has fallen on hard times due to the cut-throat competition in the commercial world. The present economic poverty has reduced him to the level of a nonentity and affected his mind and heart adversely. He feels hurt to notice that he commands no respect from anybody in the family, especially from his wife, who questions his very manhood. "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, and impertinent. What is my status in this house? Silent acceptance, perpetual snubs, constant insults, is that all I deserve after so many years?" (P.25-26). He is unhappy to know that he is regarded "only as a stamp of respectability, to be used when the need arises" (P.26). It is true that economic poverty has reduced him to a nonentity, but he has no strength of the soul to face the situation boldly. He suffers from an inferiority complex, self-pity and self-accusation, "I am of no use, of no use at all. I'm only an idler to be kicked and bullied just as you please. Can anyone tell me why I should stay here, responsible for ruining my life, your life, and all our lives! And I still stick to this house, because I'm a parasite, because I like living off my wife, because I know I'm like dry rot in this house, eating away at its very foundations." (P.26-27).

Mahendranath is a failure as a husband not only because he is not only because he is no breadwinner now, but also due to his psychological dependence on others. He is incapable of making independent decisions about life and seeks help and guidance from others. Savitri complains, "Ever since I've known him, I've always found him leaning on someone or another. Particularly on you. 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 has to ask you. When he wanted to marry me, he had to ask you. He can't even breathe without asking you, and what has been the result? That he's never had any confidence in himself. The test for everything in life has been you. Whatever you think, want, or do, he too must think, want and do. Why? Because you are a man. And he? He's not even half a man!" (P.68-69). Mahendranath seems to have neglected his own family in his eagerness to make his friends happy. This is indeed a very grave deficiency in any householder. Savitri is right when she complains about it to Juneja, "His friends need him to pass their leisure hours. No party is fun without Mahendra. His main job is to keep his friends happy. And not only is it his main job, but it should also be the only concern of his family" (P.70).

Although Mahendranath has been a very meek husband now, he had been very dominating and cruel to his wife in the past. Savitri sees a contradiction in his public amicable behavior and his private cruel behavior. She complains, "That same Mahendranath who smiles meekly among his friends, becomes a fiend when he comes home. One never knows when he may scratch one's eyes out or drink one's lifeblood: 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" (P.71). It is on account of his extremities and contradictions that he is disdained by his wife.

Another feature of his personality is his helplessness in dealing with his wife's extramarital affairs. Although, like any self-respecting husband, he dislikes his wife's lovers, he does not have the courage to oppose them openly or the generosity to ignore them. On the contrary, he asks embarrassing questions, talks only ironically about them and indulges in self-pity. Similarly, he has neither the patience to stay with the family nor the chance to go away from there. When he goes away from the house in a fit of anger and stays with Juneja, he comes back again to his house because he says he loves his wife in spite of temperamental clashes. Because of his eccentricities, he creates a psychological hell for himself as well as for others.

Mahendra's son, though, is also an extension of his personality. The son, like his father, has been a failure in his education and job. He is not serious about anything in life. He has no clearly defined goal or desire for any achievement. As his mother complains against him, he is "...only interested in three things...in sleeping all day, in cutting out pictures and ... removing items from the house..." (P.30). Otherwise, he will loaf around in the city or trail behind a girl or read pornographic books. Although his mother seriously tries to help him get a job through the influence of her boss, he does not understand his mother's concern about him. On the contrary, he asks embarrassing questions to his mother about the boss. He does not want to get a job through the influence of Singhania. Further, he draws a cartoon of Singhania and makes fun of him after the latter's departure from their home. Like his father, he is very useless. He does not understand the sacrifices made by his mother for the family. Although he himself is a useless boy, he questions everybody in the house about their past and present actions. Through his cheekiness and comic approach, he accentuates the atmosphere of the multi-dimensional hell called their family.

Thus, all five members of the family suffer from economic, sexual and temperamental problems and undergo the experience of hell caused by incompleteness, fragmentation and the resultant frustration. The tension between the desire to escape and the inevitable bondage to harsh reality continues in a repetitive circle. All the members of the family are disoriented from one another for various reasons, yet seem to be trapped in the prison of the house. *Halfway House* thus presents the predicament of the modern man in the Indian context and offers a picture of a family on the brink of disintegration. Although existential dilemma and the human predicament form the play, the theme itself cannot be described as absurdist. On the contrary, it is the technique of the play which has certain elements of the Absurd Drama. Even the dialogues are quite logical and sensible in their style. There is nothing mysterious or inexplicable about the problematic of the play. That there is no harmony or alignment of interests and goals among the members of the family, or that they have no freedom of choice, is clear enough.

3. CONCLUSION

The absurdist technique of '*Halfway House*' can be seen in its static nature. The whole play appears to be like a static image or like a bird alighting on a tree after flying a long distance. In other words, the principle of indirection seems to be the dominant technical feature of the play. For example, there is very little direct physical action in the play, whereas the indirect reconciliation is comparatively more. It seems as if everyone is at least each other's throats, nagging, humiliating and quarrelling. There is no effective communication, no attempt at reconciliation and no decisive step to start a new life independently.

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