

Mahesh Elkunchwar's Garbo --- The Seductress & The Nurturer**Jayakumar Jeyaseelan J***P.G. Teacher in English, FAIPS, DPS, Kuwait*

Mahesh Elkunchwar is one of the most influential playwrights from the post colonial India. He has twenty two plays to his credit in addition to his writings on theatre, critical works and his participation in India's Parallel Cinema as both an actor and a screen writer. His first play Sultan in 1967 announced his arrival in the national theatre scene. It was followed by plays that received critical as well as commercial acclaim such as *Holi* (1969), *Flower of Blood* (1972) *Garbo*(1973) and *Desire in the Rocks* (1973). After a sabbatical of seven or eight years Elkunchwar returned with *Old Stone Mansion*(1985), which later developed into a trilogy with *Pond*,(1992) and *Apocalypse*(1992). *Party*, *Reflection*, *Autobiography*, *As One Discardeth One's Clothes*, *Sonata*, *God Son*, and *An Actor Exits* also came between 1985 and 2005.

Elkunchwar's plays have not only been translated into Indian languages but also into English and a few European languages such as French and German. He is the proud recipient of Homi Bhabha Fellowship (1976–78), Sangeet Natak Academy Award (1989), the annual award for best playwright given by the National Academy of the Performing Arts, Maharashtra Gaurav(1990), Maharashtra Foundation Award (1997), Sahitya Academy Award (2002) given by the National Academy of Letters, Saraswathi Samman (2003), one of India's highest literary awards, the Brittingham Fellowship (2005) and the prestigious Janasthan Puraskar (2011) for his service to theatre.

Elkunchwar as a dramatist does not believe in preaching. Even though all his plays are concerned with issues of the contemporary Indian society he is not even remotely interested in "transforming" the society that he is talking about. The sense of detachment that he instills into his writing shows the exemplary control that he has in constructing a plot and peopling it with life like characters. His concern is the individual, his struggle and his pain. Even when he talks about the individual and his constant struggle, he does not offer any quick-fix solutions. He

only puts his characters in different situations and records their reactions. He says in his Notes on Theatre:

A pursuit of ideology must not close doors to deep human experience. The personal, private, metaphysical side of human life must not be eclipsed by the public and political imperatives of the day.... Ideological theatre has a decided destination and once it reaches there, it has nothing much to offer which would keep resonating in one's mind. It makes no further demands on a writer once the destination is set. All that remains is to invent convenient routes to safely reach there. I, as a writer, however, would not be able to do it. There are many reasons. When I write, I expect a personal response from my reader/viewer and not a conditioned reflex which is always a result of the preconceived codifications of life. Although I have felt close to certain ideologies at various stages in my life, I have always been convinced that no ideology is greater than LIFE itself.... An honest writer writes from a very private core of his being, which is beyond the control of intellect and so a major part of his perceptions is often subjective. It is to this that the reader/viewer has to respond in the same spirit (332-33).

Elkunchwar's concern for the individual makes him a keen observer of human behavior and so his characters brim with life and vitality. The playwright is at his best particularly with the creation of the women characters which are strikingly fresh and understandably complex. Be it Padma in Flower of Blood or Nandini and Aai from The Wada Trilogy or Garbo from Garbo Lalita of Desire in the Rocks or Aruna, Dolon and Subhadra of Sonata, the women of Elkunchwar's plays make an interesting study.

Garbo, the titular character is an interesting amalgamation of the two prominent archetypes of women -- the seductress and the nurturer. For the three men, who are involved in a relationship with her she is a symbol based on their own sexual fantasies and desires. Samik Bandyopadhyay in his introduction to the Collected Plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar, Volume I says, "They are all involved with Garbo, whom Shrimant would like to treat as 'a sex-machine'; Intuc as a 'a challenge', a living work of art, who 'grows older, but never stale...even after

fulfilling the needs of all three of us a part of her still remains untouched'; and Pansy as a mother figure, a guardian deity. All the three hit out at one another and at Garbo too with bitter, offensive banter and bite, trying to hold on to their private images of Garbo, who in her turn, hits back from time to time, often out of extreme self-contempt" (xiii).

The classic image of the seductress is one who is assertive, strong and extremely desirable. She often carries a heavy emotional baggage, creating a distrustful and manipulative personality. The narcissism that dominates her personality makes her a challenge for men. Garbo fits the mould perfectly. She is a petty actress in B grade movies and all her life depends on the physical charm that she is supposed to exude. In her case the tragedy is more pronounced since she is fast losing her glamour because of the inevitable process called ageing. "I'm on the wrong side of thirty-five, and prepared to go to bed with anybody who'll give me a role" (38).

The larger than life characters created by the movies not only influence the audience but also the actors who play such roles. Such actors along with the audience tend to believe in the images that they have created on screen and try to live up to them in their real lives. Garbo has no choice but to live up to her image of the "sex goddess". She has to remind herself and the three men who fantasize about her of the endless physical charm that she possesses by which she can have men eat out of her hand. She has willingly walked into the trap of image and now she has to prove that it is a worthy place to live in. She has to continue to lie about how her charm still works even on young men such as the director of the movie that she is presently working.

GARBO: This director was acting terribly hoity-toity to begin with. He thought he was somebody great, a genius. You know how these callow young men are. He would keep on telling us to do this and to do that. Nothing but showing off. One night I took him to my tent. I said, 'Sweetheart, you're not much older than my Pansy. Don't keep on calling out orders. Come.' Well, that was that. I had him eating out of my hand (46).

When she announces that she is pregnant, the three men involve themselves in a proprietary conflict. Each one of them tries to claim the child as his. But none of them is genuinely interested in bringing a new life on to the earth. The hypocrisy that marks their relationship comes to the fore as the men start discussing the prospect of “becoming” a father. For Shrimant the rich man, the child will be a talisman to hide his impotence, for Intuc, the phony intellectual, “It’s our only hope, our only chance. We will create something beautiful out of this filth.” (40) and for Pansy it is an opportunity to get closer to her physically and quench his physical desire.

Garbo’s announcement of pregnancy offers some kind of hope for the men and they are happy in dreaming visions of beauty. But the manipulative seductress that she is, she breaks their hearts by announcing that she had lost the baby during a shoot. Intuc shouts at her accusing her of having deceived them. Garbo immediately tells them another lie about how the director of the movie blamed himself for her loss. Her ability to lie instinctively in order to keep up her image shows how deeply she believes in what she has created on screen. However she is unable to keep up that pretence longer. She confesses how she was unable to charm the young director. She says that the director was “the first man who spat contemptuously at me.” (59)

The men are shocked to hear from her that the loss of the child was not an accident. She had killed the baby because she wanted to punish the director who had insulted her.

GARBO: I wanted to punish him. He didn’t come to my tent. I went to his one night, because I wanted a role in his next film. He sniggered. He laughed at me. I couldn’t bear it. He’d been like that from the beginning, taking every opportunity to insult me. And when I went to win him over, do you know what he said? He pointed at the camels and said. ‘Go to them. That’s what you want...when I did the camel scene my entire body was being churned up, and I kept praying, let it happen, oh God let it happen. And it did. When I felt the warm blood streaming down I screamed.’ (64)

Garbo chooses to lose the baby in her womb in order to check if her charm will still work on men. She is completely damaged in her thoughts. When she realizes that the director never came to visit her but continued the shoot replacing her with another actress, she feels completely disillusioned. She has to take revenge on men. She cannot let them dictate terms. She has to play the game of deception and always emerge as the winner. If she cannot manipulate the director of the movie, she will try it with the three men who idolize her.

Garbo's attempt to play the nurturer or the mother to Pansy complicates their relationship further. On the one hand they are involved in a physical relationship and on the other Pansy looks up to her as the mother that he could never have. She is able to look at the boy with whom she has shared her bed as her own son. The relationship is unquestionably oedipal in nature. Is it because a woman will never miss an opportunity to play the role of a mother?

J. Bland, in his essay titled, *About Gender: Jung - The Golden Flower*, says, "Behind the shadow is the collective unconscious, and the archetypes. Among these are the anima and animus. The man's persona carries with it the shadow of the man inside, and also the anima which is the complementary female element. Similarly, the woman's shadow is another woman, with elements of the man within it, the animus." The woman in man and man in woman in a way complement each other. Garbo is unable to resist the temptation of playing the mother to Pansy even though she knows that such a relationship is abhorred by society as taboo. The guilt in her keeps eating her from within, gnawing at her soul. She confesses to Intuc:

GARBO: Intuc, the disease has gone deeper in him than you think. I am responsible for it also. It's all so terrifying. Initially I played around with him just for fun. Then it became a habit. An entertaining game. But he attached different meaning to everything...he became addicted and I was responsible...I should have hardened my heart at least once" (54).

She is angry with herself for having been too flexible and giving in to the wishes of the youngster. The mother in her is pointing the accusing finger at her. She censures herself for having been too liberal. She should have drawn the line

much earlier but she could not. It is this helplessness that erupts as anger towards Pansy. She tries to push him away from her. The boy's love for her only makes her loathe him even more. In reality it is self loathing. When she screams at Pansy, she is only scolding herself for having corrupted the boy.

PANSY: Garbo, you're a great actress.

GARBO: One of these days I'm going to throttle this boy. (Pansy holds her hand tight. She pulls it free.) You know you're sickening. But pathetic as well. Why don't you go back to your parents? (38)

She is unable to forgive herself for having lured the boy into the world of physical pleasures. Pansy worships Garbo and that makes her angrier. She knows that she is not worthy of such adulation. She knows that they are all wallowing in filth and nothing but filth will be the result of their relationship. In a final attempt to break the illusions that they have all jointly conjured, she declares that she is unable to continue with the farce of their "friendship."

GARBO: You deceived yourself. You should never have expected so much out of me. I'm an ordinary woman of flesh and blood. You burdened me with all sorts of imaginary virtues. I carried on for as long as I could. But I couldn't keep up the pretence forever.

The three men see their dreams and visions of Garbo come crashing down. There is no hope of any salvation. The play comes to an end with Shrimant stabbing Garbo to death and Pansy screaming for help that will not come.

Works Cited

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