

Between Silence And Revolt: Women's Negotiation With Patriarchy In The Plays Of Mohan Rakesh

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Abstract:

With understatement and strength, Mohan Rakesh, who is an early leader in modern Hindi drama, summarizes the conflicts of women trying to bargain within patriarchal limits of the Indian society that has become post-independent. In his plays, especially Aadhe Adhure (Halfway House) and Lehron ke Rajhans (The Swan of the Waves), women characters swing between imposed silence and muffled act of defiance. The critical analysis presented in this paper shows how Rakesh performs women as more than the objects of patriarchy but rather as people who live in the predicament of both tradition and autonomy and the dissatisfaction with life in general. Based on intertwined feminist criticism and close readings, the present article discusses the dramaturgy of Rakesh as opposing reductionist gender binaries and providing highly detailed representations of women living in margins of cultures, philosophies, and affects.

Keywords: Mohan Rakesh, Aadhe Adhure, Lehron ke Rajhans, modern Hindi drama, patriarchy, women in theatre, feminist literary criticism, gender negotiation, post-independence India, silence and resistance.

INTRODUCTION:

Mohan Rakesh, (1925-72) a reformist playwright, novelist, and short story writer in post-independence India. He is one of the prominent writers of modern Hindi literature and a pioneer of Nayi Kahani movement that began in 1940's. His works turned drama into, what he calls as "Surrounding Reality" unmasking social issues such as unequal power dynamics and disintegration of a middle-class family. Mohan Rakesh, through his writings seems to be a stern follower of the principles of Rousseau, philosopher once said that 'Man is by nature good, and the acts and institutions of civilizations have produced perverted expression of his true nature'.

The history of the post-independence era in India was one of transformation of socio-cultural discourses and one of the main domains of contention and redefinition became gender roles. This was the case as the nation experienced modernity, industrialization and changing family set-ups, which found its way to literature and the theater too. A spiritual successor of the Nayi Kahani (New Story) movement, Mohan Rakesh was instrumental in bringing realism and psychological depth into the contemporary Hindi drama. His works were in contrast with ideal or mythologized images of womanhood and provided instead more complex and layered images of female characters struggling through the contradictions of a transitional society. The women in the life of Rakesh are not mere ideals of virtue sacrifice, rebellion, but as conflicted self-conscious humans arriving at deals with calling of tradition and emotional fulfilment and self-autonomy. Be it the limited world of the middle-class living room isolating the women in Aadhe Adhure or the world of the thinking and soul searching philosophy of Lehron ke Rajhans, there exists a gray place occupied by the women of Rakesh. They do not simply accept patriarchy and acquiesce to it or put on colorful resistance against it; it is rather through stealthy forms of negotiation that they resist, accommodate, and stay alive. This ambivalent stance should not be binary, and Rakesh, making such a positioning, places his dramaturgy in the collision arena of social criticism and existential challenge, particularly gender-related. The Silent Agony of Savitri in Aadhe Adhure

In Aadhe Adhure, Savitri is the typical modern Indian woman who is educated, forward and yet who is confined in the madness of the middle class man-woman relationship. She is not silent passively, her silence is a kind of survival and defense against emotional abrasion. Negotiations that Savitri undertakes between her many characters as a wife, mother and a person are the expression of a fact that identity is fragmented in the patriarchal system. She is not shy to express her discontent, but her efforts at seeking freedom in male relations confirm the boundaries to agency in systems.

According to Aparna Dharwadker, the plays of Rakesh bear an element of cultural claustrophobia with an especially fractured sense of identity and falsehood to freedom in the lives of women (Dharwadker 204). Savitri's oscillation between seeking independence and returning to the same structure that oppresses her underscores the cyclical trap of patriarchal dependency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with modern Indian theatre has witnessed a dynamic evolution, especially in the post-independence era, reflecting the nation's shifting socio-political and cultural narratives. Among the foremost voices in Indian theatrical scholarship, Vasudha Dalmia and Aparna Dharwadker have offered foundational perspectives on the ideological and aesthetic transformations that shaped modern Indian drama. Dalmia, in *Poetics, Plays, and Performances*, explores how playwrights like Mohan Rakesh navigated the tensions between tradition and modernity. She notes that "Rakesh's dramaturgy emerges from an urban middle-class milieu grappling with the erosion of values, where women often become the emotional and moral barometers of familial disintegration" (Dalmia 146). Her study provides a vital framework for understanding the gendered spaces that Rakesh dramatizes—particularly the psychological and moral burden carried by female characters.

Aparna Dharwadker extends this discourse in *Theatres of Independence*, where she critiques the limitations of nationalist narratives and highlights the fractured, self-reflexive quality of modern Indian drama. According to her, Rakesh's plays reflect "a refusal to idealize either the nation or the family, and it is in this refusal that women's voices emerge—not as heroic, but as truthful, questioning, and destabilizing" (Dharwadker 204). Her theoretical lens is instrumental in interpreting female protagonists such as Savitri and Mallika as symbolic and subjective sites of resistance.

Erin Mee, in *Theatre of Roots*, complements this view by analyzing the inward turn of modern Indian dramatists, contrasting the overtly political with the emotionally complex. Mee argues that "the most revolutionary gesture in Rakesh's plays is often emotional honesty—especially when spoken by women who are otherwise denied narrative authority" (Mee 101). This emotional honesty becomes a mode of subtle rebellion in Rakesh's work, positioning women as both participants and critics of the structures that contain them.

Sudha Shastri's essay "Gendered Spaces and Broken Homes" offers a more focused analysis of women in modern Hindi theatre. She observes that Rakesh "eschews the melodramatic archetypes of suffering women, replacing them with individuals who suffer because they think, feel, and demand coherence in a world that denies it to them" (Shastri 132). Shastri's reading of gendered spatiality—especially the claustrophobia of the domestic environment—provides key insights into how Aadhe Adhure critiques patriarchal expectations through spatial and emotional fragmentation.

While these works collectively establish Rakesh's position within Indian modernist theatre, there remains a relative paucity of focused feminist critiques of his female characters. Most analyses center on family dynamics

or existential alienation, often overlooking the nuanced ways in which women resist, negotiate, or subtly destabilize patriarchal norms. This gap is where the current study intervenes, proposing a more targeted reading of *Aadhe Adhure* and *Lehron ke Rajhans* through the lens of feminist and gender theory. The study contributes to the current body of knowledge and the research serves to illustrate how Rakesh has introduced an element of gender discourse in Indian drama that has successfully filled the middle-ground between silence and revolt.

In addition, the rereading of the characters of Savitri and Mallika in the context of the current discussions of the topic of gender provides a possibility to interpret the category of emotional labor, relational ethics, and the issue of agency within patriarchal system in a new way. The paper is itself a response to contemporary critical trends to reclaim female subjectivity in works that are otherwise considered canonical masculine writing, whereby opening up wider interpretative potentials on the work of Rakesh.

MALLIKA IN LEHRON KE RAJHANS: BETWEEN RENUNCIATION AND SELFHOOD

The position of Mallika, the female heroine in *Lehron ke Rajhans*, is deeper at the philosophical and emotional level in the reworking of the myth of the Buddhist renunciation by Mohan Rakesh. Relying weakly on the legend of Yashodhara, given wife of the prince Siddhartha (later the Buddha), Rakesh transforms this much overlooked female point of view and provides expression to what is usually neglected as the silent sorrow and intellectual opposition to the usual spiritual history. Mallika is not the sorrowful wife left alone by their self-seeking husbands in the process of questing spiritual enlightenment; but a woman willing to question the moral righteousness of the process. Her character perfectly reflects the existential and sexual conflict between *pravrajya* (spiritual renouncement) and *grihastha* (this-worldly life) between *dharma* (righteous action) and *sukha* (pleasure), disinterestedness and emotional honesty.

Patriarchy has a backhand deal with Mallika. She neither outright condemns Siddhartha's decision nor blindly venerates it. Instead, she questions its ethical and emotional cost. At one point, she reflects: "Is this the only path? To leave everything that is yours without a word, as if none of it mattered?" (Rakesh, *Lehron ke Rajhans*). In doing so, she challenges the dominant patriarchal valorization of female silence and sacrifice, and resists the religious framing of abandonment as transcendence. Her dissent is not loud or revolutionary in a conventional sense—it is contemplative, emotional, and profoundly human.

Vasudha Dalmia insightfully observes that "Rakesh subtly feminizes the discourse of detachment by allowing Mallika's emotional resistance to problematize the hero's spiritual journey" (Dalmia 148). By centering Mallika's interiority, Rakesh contests the male-centric narrative of spiritual heroism. Siddhartha's quest for enlightenment, when seen through Mallika's eyes, loses its unassailable moral clarity and is revealed as a choice that inflicts profound suffering on those left behind. Mallika's decision to remain, to live through her sorrow and speak of it, becomes a radical assertion of presence in a discourse that demands feminine erasure.

Mallika thus emerges not as a tragic relic of the past but as an active agent of philosophical reflection. As Aparna Dharwadker notes, "Her voice reclaims emotional labor and ethical complexity, resisting the spiritual rhetoric that reduces women to stepping stones on the male path to liberation" (Dharwadker 209). Her critique, though gently spoken, becomes a powerful confrontation with the gendered logic of renunciation that glorifies abandonment as enlightenment and emotional suppression as strength.

In *Lehron ke Rajhans*, Rakesh does not offer easy resolutions or grand emancipatory gestures. Instead, he offers a dialectic—between male detachment and female empathy, public virtue and private loss, spiritual

ambition and emotional truth. The sheer resilience of Mallika as she refuses to be either muted by a religious or relational obligation reminds the audience that she is the one who is keeping the moral fabric of the play intact, and through her remakes the moral architecture of the play subtly. She emerges as the moral of the story, the denial which cannot be answered, and as such she radically re-sets the emotional politics of renunciation.

WOMEN AS SITES OF CONFLICT AND REFLECTION

In Aadhe Adhure and Lehron ke Rajhans, Mohan Rakesh uses the female protagonist as a symbol of tensions in the society, crises in the mind and introspection. His female characters can never be reduced to perfection on the one hand or victims of patriarch on the other: they are complex, divided, and pensive personalities whose inner conflicts can be seen as symbolic of the contradiction of the fast-evolving Indian society. Rakesh, by using such characters as Savitri and Mallika destroys the moral categories of tradition and modernity, obligation and passion, compliance and defiance.

They are not the passive objects of male action but the active loci of meaning-making on the part of these female figures. To quote Sudha Shastri, the women inhabited by Rakesh express lived interiority against the confinement of domesticity and the easy freedom (Shastri 132). Savitri, in Aadhe Adhure, is discontented with her family because the financial and marriage insecurity is not the only concern of hers, but it is her critique of the existence that has been forced to be the way it is. Her repetitive query- "kya is ghar mein ek bhi poorā admī hai?" ("Is there a single complete man in this house?") is no mere lament, but a tear before the eye of failed masculinity and how women have to suffer to fill the gender gap left behind (Rakesh, Aadhe Adhure).

Similarly in Lehron ke Rajhans, Mallika turns out to be a reflective entity to the moral actions of Siddhartha and challenges the rightfulness of renunciation that lies out the responsibility to each other. Her philosophic and emotional doubt questions the convention-bound acceptance of male aloofness. The two women become the vessels of how Rakesh explores the disjuncture between the ideal of patriarchy and the human reality.

The theme of silence and revolt is one of the frequent patterns in the dramaturgy of Rakesh. The silence in his plays is not the nothingness or absence of speech, in most cases it is the action of agency. Silences of Savitri are volcanic, and they announce refusal, exhaustion, and sometimes a tactical retreat on denying the speech that does not guarantee dignity. The playwright Rakesh, as the theater scholar Erin Mee writes, believes that silence can be even louder than talking in his work because it indicates what cannot be voiced at all because of the restrictions of both language and authority (Mee 98). Likewise, Mallika does not speak during critical situations because she is a submissive woman; she does so as a way of looking back, a way of making a stand on emotional levels guilt against dogmatism.

The revolt in the plays of Rakesh does not break loose in dramatic action or violent confrontation; but somewhere in tantalising but powerful forms: in the questioning of morals, in the standing up against intellectual perils, in the posturing, state of being independent of the heart. These women do not aim at destroying patriarchy in a declaration but destabilizing the patriarchy in a lived contradiction. It is their defiance of resolving not to live, cashiering at a time when they are not expected to do it, not leaving when supposed to do so and not accepting being told what to think.

In this respect, the dramaturgy of Rakesh is an escape factor of the nationalistic idealization of womanhood as well as the westernized feminist ideas of liberation. He invents an Indian brand of feminist aesthetics

brought about by realism and ambivalence, and the opposition between social conformity and the inner truth. The women characters of his plays are therefore not mere actors in the play, but represent the conscience of the play, the core and the sharpest criticism of the play.

FINDINGS

The interpretation of such plays by Mohan Rakesh as *Aadhe Adhure* and *Lehron ke Rajhans* offers some major insights concerning the image of women and the concept of negotiating their lives through patriarchy in the Indian post-independent society:

1. WOMEN AS AGENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL REALISM:

The female characters created by Rakesh, especially Savitri and Mallika, turn out to bear the token of psychological realism rather than represent ideological points. The internal contradictions of personalities, emotional inconsistencies and moral indecisions are indications of the divided character of dislocated persons bargaining a society that is in the process of transition. Instead of concluding the conflict, Rakesh lets these women stay in the liminal space, showing how the struggle is never done.

2. SUBTLE RESISTANCE THROUGH REFLECTION AND SELF-AWARENESS:

Savitri and Mallika defy the patriarchy not by the means of direct confrontation but by the method of emotional soul searching and moral interrogation. They do not want to have any prescribed roles of silent endurance or selflessness sacrifice, their silent rebellion thus becomes their quiet yet powerful protest. As Vasudha Dalmia states, the spiritual struggle of the hero is complicated with Mallika and her defense to love and possession, which exposes the gendered ideology behind the accounts on the male renunciation (Dalmia 148).

3. Patriarchy as an Internalized and Structural Reality:

The plays demonstrate that patriarchy is not only an external line of constraint but as an internalized value system. As an example, Savitri tries to find self-control in her life by trying to validate herself through male relations and finds the same lack of whom she could get fulfilled. Her discontentment depicts the depth of the hierarchy of patriarchy which has been inculcated in the relationships within the families and even love.

4. Silence as a Strategic Response, Not Passive Submission:

However, as opposed to the classical perceptions, a silence in dramaturgy of Rakesh is frequently associated with agency but not with submission. Such tactical silence of both heroes Savitri in the realm of domestic argumentation and Mallika in that of spiritual discussion serves as the criticism to the male centric discourses which presuppose women to be either loyal or vocally resistant. According to Erin Mee, silence can always be louder than words in the theatre by Rakesh (Mee 98).

5. Gendered Space as Site of Conflict:

Rakesh successfully transfers larger gender struggles through the use of specific and personal areas. Claustrophobic home is the site of hanging unresolved emotional tensions and shattered identities in *Aadhe Adhure*. Within the setting of *Lehron ke Rajhans*, the palace and the philosophical court turn out to be the places where the clash of gendered expectations and spiritual ideals takes place. Such spaces are not neutral, and they are ideologically laden and emotionally saturated.

6. Contemporary Relevance of Rakesh's Women:

The existential and emotional conflicts of Rakesh women still persist in the gender debate today. The conflicts of self, self-will and interpersonal ethics are throwbacks to many of the concerns about women as agents,

within a society that has literally changed the mode of its basic structure even as it remains patriarchal in the assumptions governing its approach to women. The tales they told provide great lessons about the complexity of fighting and on the toll of being submissive or being non-conformist.

An investigation conducted on the plays by Mohan Rakesh, Aadhe Adhure and Lehron ke Rajhans will show some remarkable findings on how the women of post independence Indian society are represented and how they negotiate with patriarchy of the time:

- **Women as Agents of Psychological Realism:**
The female characters of Rakesh, especially Savitri and Mallika, become the media of psychological realism but not the marker of the ideology. The tort, unhappy inner selves, emotional contradictions and moral confusions show the broken part of some of the identities of other negotiating persons in a transitional society. Instead of resolving, Rakesh keeps these women in a liminal space thus exposing the sense of continuity of their struggle.
- **Subtle Resistance through Reflection and Self-Awareness:**
Both Savitri and Mallika are rebels to the rules and regulations of patriarchy not by sending out political manifestos but through emotional soul-searching and giving rise to ethical questions. Their rejection of the designated roles of passive suffering or self-sacrifice turn into a sort of hush, but dramatic protest. Such emotional opposition on the part of Mallika as pointed out by Vasudha Dalmia does in fact problematize the spiritual path of the hero who has to adopt renunciation to leave the scene of action (Dalmia 148) and this opposes the gendered assumptions underlying the stories of male renunciation.
- **Patriarchy as an Internalized and Structural Reality:**
The plays unveil the way in which patriarchy happens as an external form of restriction, but also an internal code of value. Savitri, as an example tries to take control of her life by trying to get affirmation through relations with the male, but finds the same emptiness there. Her discontentness reveals the way in which the patterns of patriarchy are rooted in family and romance relations as well.
- **Silence as a Strategic Response, Not Passive Submission:**
On the contrary, silence, as dramaturgy, used by Rakesh sometimes meant agency, not subordination. This wrongly presented adro-participation, the political invisibility of women, is countered by Strategic Silence, the patriarchal call to either obey or aggressively protest with equal ferocity, being shown in the different ways in which silence becomes an option to both protagonists: the fatigue of Savitri in the argumentative scenes of her domestic scenarios and the silent retention displayed by Mallika in the spiritual disputations. In the theatre, as Erin Mee notes, silence is at times louder than words in the theatre in the case of Rakesh (Mee 98).
- **Gendered Space as Site of Conflict:**
Rakesh succeeds in making the domestic and intimate working spaces describe the wider gender confrontations. The claustrophobic home transforms to a theatre of unresolved emotional tensions and broken identities in Aadhe Adhure. The palace in Lehron ke Rajhans and the philosophical court turns into the arena of competition between gendered expectations and spiritual ideals. Such places are not neutral: they are ideologically tensed and emotionally heated.
- **Contemporary Relevance of Rakesh's Women:**

The existential and romantic crisis that Rakesh women encounter, still find a reflection in the gender question of our time. These tensions are manifested in their identity crises, their battle to establish autonomy and in their morality in relating to others in a society that is structurally altered but remains patriarchal in its essential premises. The vicissitudes of resistance and the human price to be paid by conforming or by refusing are informative through their stories.

Conclusion

Female characters in the works of Mohan Rakesh do not fit into the easy dividing categories of victimhood-empowerment, passive-rebellious or traditional-modern categories. They do not exist, rather, they live in the intermediate place fraught, contemplative, and ambiguous, where the survival is not a simple act, but a complicated negotiation. This inbetweenness does not indicate indecision but rather a point of covert disobedience. Be it Savitri, trying to cope with the breakdown of her family in *Aadhe Adhure* or Mallika, who challenged the purity of spiritual renunciation in *Lehron ke Rajhans*, these women do not revolt against patriarchy, but negotiate with it through persistence and protest, as well as self-realization.

Patriarchal oppression is revealed through the psychological features of its refusal to take up idealized roles, be it that of self-sacrificing mother or enlightened rebel. According to the arguments by theatre scholar Erin Mee, Rakesh draws the world where the personal suffering of women becomes the most effective judge of the social standards (Mee 101). His dramaturgy casts women interiority as the most important perspective through which social, emotional, and even philosophical conflicts are removed. Such landscapes of the interior are not only mirrors but political acts as they reveal the systematic muting of female want, uncertainty, and power.

The women depicted by Rakesh are quite timely in a society that is fast being modernized as the old order clashes with the new ones. Their fight can be related to current discussions of gender, agency, and ethics of relationships. With Mallika and Savitri it is asking the readers and the audience to look at the cost of conformity and the cost of dissent and the silent annihilation of individuality through the broken worlds of characters Mallika and Savitri as they navigate through it. Through this process, Rakesh in his theatre not only dramatised gendered experience but he redescribed it as the defining moment of humanity. His plays therefore form a lasting input to feminist discourse they do not provide the resolution to the contradictions, rather they disclose contradiction in which women have to live, think and act.

Recommendations

According to the interpretation of the plays by Mohan Rakesh and the subtle description of the female characters trying to balance between the patriarchal power, the next recommendations can be made to the future study, theatre work and gender issues discussion:

1. Reframe Canonical Interpretations of Indian Drama through a Gendered Lens

Following the discussion of the plays of Mohan Rakesh and the implications of a subtle realism of feminine individuals dealing with constraints of patriarchy, the following are proposed recommendations to future research, performance and gender theory.

2. Encourage Performative Reimaginings in Contemporary Theatre

The directors, playwrights, and practitioners in the theatre sector are urged to produce the plays of Rakesh keeping in mind the inner subjectivity of the female characters. Contemporary productions can play with places, lights, and plotlines in order to bring out the dynamics of the fact of letting an emotional and psychological depth of characters such as Savitri and Mallika. The process of rethinking silences, disjointed

conversations, and domestic settings with the sense of feminism might contribute to making the work by Rakesh more appealing to the present-day viewers.

3. Expand Comparative Gender Studies in South Asian Drama

Drawings should be made in future between the female protagonists found by Rakesh and other known women protagonists to other regional and world traditions, so as to comprehend how these different cultures dramatise the woman in her negotiation of patriarchy. The given type of comparison can contribute to the further development of the global feminist literary criticism and put Rakesh in the bigger perspective of the transnational dialog on gender and resistance.

4. Integrate Rakesh's Works into Gender and Performance Studies Curricula

Plays written by Rakesh should be included into syllabuses of university programs and courses in literature, theatre studies, and gender studies with a focus on performance and identity. His work can be used as a source of rich discussion in the classroom on the concept of intersectionality, existential feminism, and performativity so that Indian students will have access to culturally relevant, but philosophically deep texts.

5. Archive and Translate Rakesh's Feminist Dramaturgy for Wider Access

It requires more sensitive translated editions of the works of Rakesh, which maintain not merely linguistic, but also emotional color, as well as gendered understatement. Cross-cultural research can be achieved through the feminist annotated editions that would enable the works of Rakesh to be more accessible to non-Hindi-reading audiences and scholars.

6. Foster Dialogues between Theatre and Contemporary Gender Movements

Rakesh needs also to be translated in a more subtle way that conserves not merely linguistic loyalty but also emotional tones and gender overtones. Feminist commentaries added to annotated editions of Rakesh can also allow cross-cultural research on it and make it accessible to non-Hindi language readers and scholars.

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