Week 5: Mahesh Elkunchwar

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Lecture 15: Introduction and Garbo

- Mahesh Elkunchwar (b. 1939), born in a Telugu Brahmin family, migrated to Vidharba district in Maharashtra. He completed his education in Nagpur University. In Nagpur he was exposed to Marathi theatre and influenced by the plays of Vijay Tendulkar.
- Experimented with expressionist and absurdist theatre.
- Theatre for him had to do with realizing the multiple possibilities of the experience of life.
- Challenged the hierarchy between art and ideology, between individual and social or collective pain and suffering.
- Emphasis on poetry, and the gestural repertoire of the body to connote emotions.

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Garbo

- Portrays the alienation and isolation of urban life in Bombay from the perspective of three male characters from Nagpur. Shrimant is a wealthy businessman, Intuc a professor and Pansy an adolescent. They are all struggling and experience the sterility of their lives.
- Garbo is a "sex-machine" for Shrimant, an exalted mother-figure for Pansy and an inexhaustible aesthetic ideal for Intuc. All the men seek redemption and hope through their imagination of Garbo on whom they project their frustrations and fantasies.
- They use their desires to transcend themselves but their private fantasies of Garbo is undermined by her bitter comebacks and self-contempt as a B grade actress who has sexual affairs with many men.
- Each of the men sees their collection salvation in Garbo's baby that they later discover was aborted by her during a shoot. They are initially hopeful that the baby will inherit their name

but they are later disillusioned and realize they are condemned to remain in their world of filth and sterility.

- Shrimant is revealed as an emasculate and insecure man who needs Garbo to validate his masculinity and sexual prowess while he actually wants Pansy with whom he has also had a sexual affair. Intuc confesses he is a poet who lacks originality and needed Garbo as his muse who would inspire artistic creativity but now that she cannot become a mother again, they welcome her as a part of their sterile world.

- The body seems to be the only reality and the sexual act the only way of potentially attaining identity and recognition and relief from a sterile world. But even the body ends up becoming a lie. Shrimant stabs Garbo in the end, the blood is real but Garbo is no more. They realize the Garbo they knew was merely an embodiment of their fantasies of redemption and transcendence. She is barely given the opportunity to speak or resist their constructions of her.

Lecture 16: The Old Stone Mansion

- Set in the old decrepit mansion of the Deshpandes, a landed Brahmin family that is losing its status and power to newly instituted land reforms.

- The growth of Bombay as a metropolis that promises jobs enables many other caste groups from the village, particularly the cooks who work for the Deshpandes, to migrate to Bombay in search of jobs. Other lower caste groups brew liquor or work in newly set up restaurants in the village.

- The play was inspired by Anton Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard* that described socio-economic transformations in early 20th century Russia, with the abolition of serfdom, the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of the middle class. The orchard that belongs to a landowner has to be auctioned and sold to a newly freed serf and is chopped off at the end of the play as the family moves out.

- The tractor is a symbol of the hollow prestige of the Deshpande family, something that is no longer an economic investment in a village with small land holdings and hardly any electricity.

- Bhaskar, the eldest son, refuses to accept that they are no longer as rich as they were. They are indebted to the vegetable seller who has now started his own business and wants to buy their orchard if they can't repay their debts. Bhaskar wants to have an extravagant funeral for his father and asks Sudhir for money. Power over the household is transferred from the mother-in-law to Vahini, Bhaskar's wife and eldest daughter-in-law.

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- But Sudhir and his wife Anjali struggle to make ends meet in Bombay, an expensive city, where one has to work all the time to repay loans and mortgages and just survive in a rented apartment. The rest of family assumes he leads a comfortable life and cannot imagine urban debt.

- The family berates Anjali for her Konkanastha Brahmin origins, her fair skin and education. Her son Abhay is supposed to be a good student and sportsman. Abhay is contrasted to Parag, Bhaskar's son, who is a drunken wastrel and drug addict.

- The patriarch's daughter Prabha wants to study further and leave the house but her father never let her.

- Different generations of characters symbolize historical change – the patriarch's mother has lost her memory and still thinks her son is alive, the patriarch's widow Aai has her share of the house sold by Bhaskar to raise money to repay their debts.

- The Deshpandes are only left with their ancestral jewelry, which is a symbol of their familial reputation. Bhaskar's daughter Ranju is exposed and drawn to the urban world through the radio and her English tutor with whom she has an affair and elopes, taking the jewelry with her. But the tutor deceives her and steals the jewelry and Sudhir ends up bringing Ranju back in a taxi to preserve the family's reputation. This ruins Prabha's only hope of seeking her share of the jewelry and escaping the house.

- Parag is let down by his uncle Sudhir, he hopes to go to Mumbai with him so that he may have access to a more exciting and freer urban world.

- The play ends with the backyard and orchard being mowed down as it is being sold to save the family from bankruptcy. Chandu is the only son who sacrifices his happiness to take care of his mother and sister.

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Lecture 17: Desire in the Rocks

- The play is a story of incest and the sterility of life. The play has two major characters, Hemakant and Lalitha, who are brother and sister and five unnamed women from the village.

- The play like Garbo depicts the self as a site for a drama between the oppressive norms of society and the transgressive impulses of art and eroticism that challenges these norms. This battle is embodied in the body of the woman, in this case, Lalitha, which results in the disillusionment of the man and the de-idealization of the woman.

- Lalitha has spent all her life trapped in a wooden mansion. She was her father's adoptive daughter who abandoned her in the mansion. She belongs to a lineage that is believed to have been cursed with no natural surviving heirs. Every child is stillborn, which is why Dadasaheb, Lalitha's adoptive father abandons her in the mansion to pursue his own education. She is reunited with her much older brother twenty years after he left the mansion to pursue his career as an artist.

- Hemakant is initially an emotionally detached artist who is willing to isolate himself for the sake of art. Lalitha is the embodiment of his unconscious desire, his creativity. He uses her to assume different postural expressions of his ideal embodiment of love and desire.

- She loves Hemakant but he is unable to return her love. She accuses him of being a fake artist, and he believes she does not understand art. There is a authoritarian nature to Hemakant's unconscious world of art and eroticism and Lalitha is willing to surrender herself to own and possess Hemakant and the transformation in Hemakant occurs when his statues of Lalitha are destroyed by the villagers.

- Lalitha who claims to be a creator like Hemakant gives birth to a dead baby, which confirms her fear that she has sinned by loving her own brother for which she continues to live 'in sin' by turning to prostitution to survive. She has no access to her own ancestral property, which is managed by trustees.

- When Lalitha sings to a baby, the child of one of the women in the village, they scold her and outcaste her for being an unlucky and sinful presence.

- Both Lalitha and Hemakant realize they are both sterile creators. Hemakant is stoned and beaten up by the villagers while Lalitha turns to prostitution. They realize the falsity of the body, and even as they surrender to each other in love and intimacy they are both destroyed in the mansion where they lived.

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