

Article

## Social Conflict in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Old Stone Mansion*

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**Abstract:** The Deshpande family of Dharangaon is averse to socio-cultural change. The real external problems with Maharashtrian culture, whether in urban or rural India, are the dwindling feudalism and caste conservatism. The fundamental components of the play are produced by each character's defiance or stoic acceptance of fate. The drama illustrates the Deshpandes' difficulties adjusting to contemporary society. The world is rapidly evolving. It is necessary to accept the change and make the necessary adjustments. The Deshpande family members are self-centred. Their reasoning suggests that they sought to preserve the family's reputation. Thus, Mahesh Elkunchwar portrays the Wada (mansion) culture, family dynamics, and decay of the feudal family. One of the leading causes of discrimination and injustice, according to the *Old Stone Mansion*, is patriarchal male chauvinism.

**Keywords:** Social Conflict; Feudalism; Family relations; Modernity; Generation gap; Patriarchy

### Introduction

Mahesh Elkunchwar is a veteran Marathi dramatist whose works have been presented in various Indian languages. He has received numerous prominent national honours and fellowships, including the Homi Bhabha Fellowship (1976–78), the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1989), the Sahitya Akademi Award (2002), and the Saraswati Samman (2002). He has retired as an English literature professor and previously taught at the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune.

The play *Old Stone Mansion* focuses on the Deshpandes, an urban-rural middle-class family from the Dharangaon hamlet in Vidarbha, Maharashtra state, and their complex human relationships. The play is still remembered as a milestone in Marathi and Indian theatre. It is more than just a family drama; it is a social history of change. It addresses caste orthodoxy and feudalism.

The play was initially written in Marathi and titled *Wada Chirebandi*. The title is significant, referring to an old stone rural house. It represents the old aristocratic feudal attitude that is resistant to modern developments.

Mahesh Elkunchwar presents four generations and their problems in the play. Dadi belongs to the first generation, and the deceased Tatyaji and Aai are the second. Bhaskar-Vahini, Sudhir-Anjali, Chandu, and Prabha represent the third generation, while Parag and Ranju (Bhaskar and Vahini's children) and Abhay (Sudhir and Anjali's son) represent the fourth generation. The bond of love is expected to be strong in a joint family, but in this case, it seems to be diminishing after Tatyaji's death. Sudhir has already moved to Mumbai and occasionally visits Dharangaon. Bhaskar remarks, "Do that. We should try to come together at least for funerals and festivals." (83)

Tatyaji's eldest son, Bhaskar, now heads the family. Vahini's place is next to Bhaskar's. Chandu holds no higher standing than that of a servant. Prabha and Aai also live a miserable life. As head of the family, Bhaskar is responsible for keeping the family together and intact. He should behave like a loving and caring parent. On the contrary, Bhaskar's most distinguishing quality is his desire for money, gold, and the ancestral home. He has been unmoved by his father's demise. Interestingly, he is seen snoring and sleeping well in the aftermath of his father's death. He does not want to spend money on his father's funeral rituals. He asks his brother to contribute to the funeral.

Chandu: Sudhir ... (Sudhir looks at him inquiringly.). I mean ... Bhau sent me to you ... (faltering.) ... he's asked seven or eight hundred rupees ... if you have it.

Sudhir: Seven or eight hundred? Where will I suddenly produce that much from? We left in such a hurry when the telegram came, there was no time even to go to the bank. (92)

His mother, Aai, provides Chandu money when he notifies her that the shopkeeper expects payment for groceries and will not give them on credit. Aai takes money from the folds of a saree and hands it to Chandu. Chandu hesitated to accept it. Aai remarks that these are his final expenses, and the rites must be conducted well.

Bhaskar, the protagonist, raises a fuss about an expense but remains silent on his income. He wants to take over the property on his own and refuses to share it with others. Furthermore, he is insensitive to the sufferings of his younger brother Chandu, who is unable to live. He has completely failed to carry out his responsibilities as a son, father, and elder brother. His true personality is revealed near the end of the play, as we witness his insatiable need for gold. He has gold ornaments that also belong to other family members. He is constantly careful to keep these trinkets hidden. He is unwilling to share with others.

Vahini: Will you please leave it where it was?

Bhaskar: Look. Everyone's share is here. Aai's, Prabha's, Sudhir's, Chandu's, and mine. I won't show it all to Sudhir.

Vahini: You think he doesn't know how much each one has?

Bhaskar: What can he do if I say Tatyaji sold it? Let him see for himself when I open the safe on the thirteenth day. I put this in the pooja room the day before yesterday. (129)

His attitude changes towards the end, where he accepts the facts and remarks, "The younger brother has become the elder and the elder younger today." (135)

Sudhir, Bhaskar's younger brother, stands midway as far as his nature goes. Though he is self-centred and money-driven, he is not as evil as Bhaskar. Twenty years ago, he moved to Bombay with his wife, Anjali, and their lone kid, Abhay. His association with the Dharangaon-based Deshpande family is formal. He pays visits to the family in Dharangaon on special events such as weddings and deaths. His appearance on the fifth day is very ceremonial. He is highly cognisant of his share. He reveals, "The only reason why I can come here as a matter of right is because I own a share." (122) He tells his wife he is interested in four acres of land and a share in the house.

Sudhir: Four acres of farmland and a share in the house.

Anjali: Why don't you settle things once and for all?

Sudhir: Meaning.

Anjali: Just divide, distribute, and be done with it. We haven't been here in years, and Abhay isn't the least bit interested in this place. (122)

Sudhir protests when Bhaskar informs him that they must feed the entire community on the thirteenth day, following the custom. It will cost 20,000 or 25,000 rupees. He says he is unable to contribute any sum. He wants to own his piece of land since he may need money in the future. Bhaskar claims he spent the money on Aai and Tatyaji. He forgets that everything belongs to his parents. Bhaskar mortgages Aai's part to cover the twelfth day's expenditures.

Tatyaji's youngest son, Chandu, is also a third-generation member. He is entirely different from his older brothers. He is honest, ignorant, and utterly unprepared for the future. He is unmarried and without money. He was born to work, and he bears the burden of family on his shoulders. His existence is the most miserable, and his misery makes us anxious. Except for Aai, no one in the family expresses genuine affection towards him. He agrees to mortgage his portion of Wada to fund Tatyaji's final ceremony.

Aai is one of the play's most essential female characters. She often appears helpless. She represents the oppressed, who see existence as a misfortune rather than a blessing. She remains cool and composed. Her stoic mindset and extensive life experience make this easier for her. She is fair-minded and wishes to execute her husband Tatyaji's dying rites. She donates all of her possessions for the last ceremony. Towards the end of the play, we find that even her half of the Wada has been mortgaged. When the chants are halfway done, her share is bulldozed. The chanting of the ninth-day mantra can be heard. The word 'spirit' is heard again and again above the rest.

When the mantras are halfway through, the rumble of the bulldozer begins. Then the sounds of the bulldozer and the mantras mingle. (138)

Vahini, Bhaskar's wife, is another key female character in the play. She is the Deshpandes' eldest daughter-in-law. Her nature contradicts that of her husband. She adores her children, Parag and Ranju, cares about Chandu, and asks Bhaskar to take him to the doctor. Anjali appears to be a good person. She lacked shrewdness. She is not greedy for gold. Towards the end of the play, the sight of gold dazzles her. However, she maintains her composure and tells her husband to give the due share to all and be free. She says, "Put it in the pooja room. (Bhaskar is speechless.) First thing tomorrow, give each one his share." (128)

Sudhir's wife, Anjali, has a money-oriented attitude. She is Koknasth, and she lives in Mumbai. As a housewife, she is helpful and concerned for her husband, who has high blood pressure. She is also aware of her portion of the land. She looks to be highly particular about antiques in her family. She understands Chandu's sufferings. She is fair-minded and practical.

Tatyaji's unmarried daughter, Prabha, is the most intelligent of the children. She stood first in matriculation and desired to be a doctor. However, her father's decision had dashed her long-held dream. Her father was opposed to girls' education, which pushed her to discontinue her studies. She lost interest in gold, marriage, and family. Her academic proclivity persuaded her mother to complete her education in the interest of her share of gold. She comments, "Once I have a job, I'll buy back gold for you." (130)

Ranju and Parag are Bhaskar and Vahini's children, representing the fourth generation. Ranju has a naturally flirty personality and enjoys watching films. She wants to be an actor. She eloped with her teacher-lover, carrying all the family's gold. Her teacher lover betrayed her and ran away with the gold she was carrying, leaving her alone. The gold, which the Deshpandes obtained by other people's sweat, is the root cause of disputes. Ranju provides comic relief, making this dark play bearable. Parag, on the other hand, has gone astray. He chews tobacco and drinks wine. Most of the time, he is absent from the house.

The state of the house (Wada) is worse than the state of the family relationship. The house needs immediate repairs. The house's declining state is a sign of the decline of feudalism. Here, the dramatist authentically depicts the family members' attitudes by showcasing scenes in different rooms. Bhaskar is seen showing gold ornaments to Vahini. He aspires to grab them all. Wants to catch them all. Bhaskar's daughter, Ranju, is in excruciating anguish because her father has halted her private classes. Aai is powerless to stop Prabha from pursuing her dream of studying.

Towards the end of the play, we see Ranju eloping with her teacher lover. Sudhir tracks her down in Bombay and brings her home. Her lover fooled Ranju. Her boyfriend has grabbed her gold and left, leaving Ranju to her fate. Bhaskar is enraged and beats Ranju viciously. It has been nine days since Tatyaji died. We hear chants being uttered during Tatyaji's final ritual. The rumble of the bulldozer is also audible. Sudhir's wife,

Anjali, is seen lost as she prepares to depart. A moment later, Sudhir and his wife, Anjali, leave for Bombay, bringing the end of the play.

The play demonstrates how the Deshpandes struggled to adapt to modern times. The world is changing quickly. One must embrace the change and adapt appropriately. Members of the Deshpade family are known to be selfish. Their thinking suggests that they wished to preserve the family's prestige. A tractor in the yard represents richness. The tractor is not in use and has become a source of loss. The tractor was purchased to demonstrate affluence and modernity. The mansion can be regarded as a historical monument and a testimony to an aristocratic family. The insolvent Deshpande family wants to show off. The family suffers from the vainglory of pride in caste and glory, which has already passed. The aristocratic feudal households faced severe financial difficulties, which contributed to the collapse of the family. The drama portrays how social pressures, caste pride, and customs cause families to break apart.

Aai's tragedy is a reflection of the misfortune brought about by the erosion of feudal values and patriarchal norms. That is what the playwright is trying to imply in the play. No one wants to fight against the system. Everyone wants to hold on to memories. No one advocates even the most basic changes, such as economic reform, which can bring about freedom and liberation from extremely regressive values (Kanna, 152-153).

The Deshpandes' family is prepared to welcome modernity and change in its fourth generation. Parag wanted to accompany Sudhir to Mumbai. Bhasker believes Parag will spoil Sudhir's son Abhay, hence he is not ready to allow him to go to Mumbai. He consistently thinks highly of Abhay and appreciates his appearance, attire, and cricket style. When Parag finds out that Abhay has placed first in his class, he even joyfully dances. However, according to Sudhir, Abhay also recalls that Parag taught him how to swim in the pond. Abhay dislikes missing a single day in the gym. Despite his dislike of movie actors, Abhay is a massive fan of Gavaskar and Kapil Dev. His goal is to work as an engineer. He is currently enrolled in his last year of junior college.

The Deshpande family of Dharangaon is resistant to social and cultural change. The fading feudalism and caste orthodoxy are the true extrinsic issues rooted in Maharashtrian culture, whether in the urban or rural areas of India. Each character's resistance or stoic acceptance of fate creates the play's core elements. Bhaskar is not adequately educated and fails to uphold Wada's honour. Sudhir is well-educated and lives in Mumbai, but he maintains the lifestyle of a cosmopolitan city.

Mahesh Elkunchwar thus depicts the feudal family's Wada (mansion) culture, family relations, and decline. The Old Stone Mansion portrays patriarchal male chauvinism as a primary source of prejudice and injustice. The play portrays the brothers' conflict, which ultimately evolves into a broader social conflict.

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