



The Portrayal of Women in Mohan Rakesh's Plays: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

During the decades after India's independence, life was changing fast—cities were growing, traditions were shifting, and people were learning to adjust to a new type of freedom. In this adjustment, Hindi theatre also started changing. Writers no longer stuck to mythological or idealistic tales; rather, they started developing the real, often messy, emotional lives of everyday people. Mohan Rakesh was at the heart of this movement, a playwright who brought raw honesty and psychological depth to the stage.

Maybe most remarkable about Rakesh's plays is that he wrote women—not abstract principles or passive victims, but actual, messy human women. His women characters think, feel deeply, and often stand in the difficult position between old ways and new possibilities. They're not merely responding to their universe; they're fighting with an effort to define it, to define themselves, and to find meaning in lives that won't fit into prescribed forms.

This essay looks closer at the women from three of Rakesh's most influential plays—Ashadh Ka Ek Din, AdheAdhure, and LehronKeRajhans. Through the prisms of feminism and existentialism, it explores the way in which they grapple with alienation, repression, and self. Not only are their narratives exploring the evolving status of the female in post-independence India, but the common search for identity and belonging amongst humankind. Through them, Rakesh presents us with an



unflinching, sometimes tortured, but always reflective examination of what it is to be a woman in transition—between what was and what might be.

Key Words: Mohan Rakesh, AdheAdhure, Asadh Ka Ek Din, Women

Introduction

Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) has a profoundly important position in the history of modern Hindi theatre. When Indian theatre was beset by mythological drama and didactic storytelling, Rakesh introduced an altogether different way—a concern for his characters' inner lives, their emotional tensions, and the insidious, generally agonized crises of normal life. Since he was one of the strongest proponents of the NaiKahani (New Story) movement, his play marked a sea change in Indian writing for the theater because it represented psychological realism as well as human relationship understanding, which was a step higher from what was prevailing, particularly as a part of a changing society.

One of the most satisfactory things about Rakesh is the manner in which he presented women. In contrast to previous depictions, which generally viewed women characters as representations of virtue, sacrifice, or obedient duty, Rakesh's women are troubled, reflective, conflicted, and emotionally complex. They desire something more than society has historically provided them—something more substantial, more freedom, and more room to feel and express themselves. They are flawed; they are profoundly human, formed by the stresses of a changing world and by the internal contradictions of their own making.

Under the shadow of a newly independent India, where struggle between tradition and modernity was not so much cultural as acutely personal, Rakesh's women become more than they are as figures in a drama—they are echoes of a society at a crossroads. His plays—Ashadh Ka Ek Din, AdheAdhure, and LehronKeRajhans, in particular—provide uncompromising portraits of women attempting to assert themselves in a universe that frequently denies them that privilege. They resist roles attributed to them, but to resist them is to be punished by loneliness, self-blame, alienation, and psychic anguish.



This essay tries to find out how Rakesh's female characters subvert traditional gender roles and find their quest for meaning despite social restrictions. Through an examination of feminist literary theory and existentialist philosophy, the study explores how Rakesh employs theatre as a form of questioning fixed roles, probing human freedom, and voicing women's silent struggles. In so doing, it also takes into account the cultural implications of these portrayals, both in their context of origin and in the larger evolution of Indian theatre history. Lastly, such characters allow us to learn not just about women's lives during post-independence India, but also about humanity's universal want for connection, recognition, and selfhood

Socio-Cultural Background: Women in Transition

The post-independence decades were years of hope, rebuilding, and change years of tension and contradiction, above all, for women. Everything was changing on the surface. As urbanization accelerated, as more girls attended school, and new avenues for employment opened up, women began crossing over out of the home in great numbers. They began questioning their assigned roles as obedient daughters, wives, and mothers and began seeking out individual purpose, identity, and liberty. These desires were, however, confronted with opposition, entrenched patriarchal tradition continued to fashion society's expectations, and although women might be gaining access to new arenas, they were seldom received without criticism or constraint. This engendered a fierce inner and outer struggle a conflict between what tradition required and what modern life appeared to provide.

Of course, these changing realities soon found reflection in the arts. Indian theatre and literature began to depart from the romanticized or idealized representations of women and began to edge toward representations that were more realistic and nuanced. Women characters were increasingly more than mere background figures they were beginning to think, have desires, and experience their own dilemmas. But Hindi theatre, especially, was slow in accepting these developments. Even deep into the mid-20th century, women on the stage were usually given starkly binary roles: they were either goddesses to be adored or sufferers to be sympathized icons of chastity or symbols of perseverance but never depicted as actual, vulnerable, thinking beings(Kaur, 2023).

It was against such a backdrop that Mohan Rakesh began to speak like a radical voice. He didn't merely redo stories he rediscovered women. His women did not remain cooped up inside the boundaries of saintly conduct or mute wretchedness.



They were not idealized; they were not wholly sympathetic, either; but rather, human complex, reflective, firm-willed, sometimes disillusioned, and repeatedly torn between multiple desires. Rakesh provided them with a voice, with an inner life, and, most crucially, with the ability to be wrong, to suffer, to make decisions, and to live with their own actions. Through this, he injected Indian theatre with a long-absent realism that recognized the psychological and emotional complexity of women in a world that was altering, but too gradually (Adhure Rakesh Kumar & Sharma, n.d.).

Character Studies

1. Mallika in Ashadh Ka Ek Din

In *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (1958), Mallika is arguably the most unobtrusively assertive and emotionally subdued female role in Hindi theatre. The play, situated at the start of the great poet Kalidas's life, is a restrained exploration of the conflict between ambition and desire, between a calm, earthy existence and the lure of fame. Mallika, Kalidas's mistress, is not an abstraction a cipher love interest; she is the focus of the life Kalidas relinquishes. She is intimacy, emotional richness, and an abiding bond with nature and simplicity (Exploring the Theme of Love and Loss in Mohan Rakesh's *One Day in Ashada*, 2017). When Kalidas makes the heart-wrenching choice to leave her for fame and acclaim in the royal court, Mallika does not disintegrate into melodrama or pursue him as one would normally expect of women on stage, according to traditional portrayals.

Instead, Mallika meets it with a form of silent dignity, an inner resilience that doesn't depend on sweeping gestures or emotion displays. She weeps, yes—but on her own terms. She gets on with her life not as a shattered figure, but as someone who prefers emotional independence over need. In a society that often measured a woman's worth in terms of her marriage potential or her capacity to sacrifice, Mallika's choice to remain unmarried and lead a complete life independent of marriage was radical.

What is so fascinating about Mallika is that she defies conventional notions of what it is to be feminine. She is neither a passive muse to be forgotten nor a sorrowful lover based on loss. She is a woman who has sight who has insight into Kalidas's desire and laments the emotional space it creates but does not allow it to control or reduce her. From a feminist standpoint, Mallika is also a quiet but forceful figure of resistance. Her silence, her aloneness, and her choice to keep on living with dignity



are not acts of weakness they are her means of taking back agency in a world that tends to commodify women's loyalty and love.

In so many ways, Mallika embodies the price of male ambition and the strength of feminine inner strength. She doesn't have to yell to be heard; her gentle presence dares the audience to rethink what strength is, particularly in a woman. Through Mallika, Mohan Rakesh presents us with a woman who will not be reduced to someone's stepping stone or sacrificial lamb. She chooses herself and in the process, becomes indelible (Gautam & Tyagi, 2025).

2. Savitri in AdheAdhure

If Mallika from *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* represents quiet resilience and inner strength, Savitri in *AdheAdhure* (1969) is her stark contrast a woman whose pain is not muted but raw, vocal, and deeply unsettling. Often described as the “new woman” of modern Hindi theatre, Savitri is not content with enduring silently. She lives in a crumbling middle-class home, trapped in a joyless marriage to an unemployed, emotionally detached husband and surrounded by children who neither understand her nor offer her affection. The domestic space, traditionally seen as a woman's domain of purpose and fulfillment, becomes for her a site of suffocation, disillusionment, and emotional starvation.

What sets Savitri apart is her refusal to accept this hollow life. She craves more emotional validation, sexual satisfaction, perhaps even the feeling of being heard and noticed. She becomes involved in affairs not for lust, but because she needs so desperately to feel loved and loved back. And yet, no effort satisfies her. Her discontent erupts in scathing exchanges, stinging jabs, and passionate tirades. She's bitter or even cruel at times, but under that surface is a woman struggling against being invisible, a woman drained by the thanklessness of wife, mother, homemaker.

It is not merely that Savitri rebels, but how Rakesh decides to show her rebellion, that makes her revolutionary. He does not present us with a martyr or a villain he presents us with a woman in all her contradictions: nurturing and resentful, assertive and fragile, fiercely independent and emotionally dependent. She is neither an ideal, nor a warning. She is simply human. Rakesh does not romanticize her pain nor judge her decisions; rather, he lets her multifacetedness remain unrepentant on stage.



Through Savitri, Rakesh lays bare the emptiness of bourgeois family life, the hypocrisy of societal expectations, and the psychological toll of playing roles that offer no real fulfillment. The very title of the play *AdheAdhure* (translated as *Halfway House* or *Incomplete*) mirrors Savitri's fragmented existence.. She is constantly pulled in multiple directions, expected to hold everything together while she herself is falling apart inside.

In Savitri, we see not just a critique of marriage, but a broader questioning of what it means to be a woman in a society that demands perfection, silence, and sacrifice but gives so little in return. She may not be easy to like, but she is impossible to ignore. And that, perhaps, is her greatest power(Shodhparak et al., 2019).

3. Kamini in LehonKeRajhans

In LehonKeRajhans (1963), Kamini stands as a deeply symbolic figure caught in the turbulent clash between spiritual longing and earthly desire. Her character is not defined by outward rebellion or vocal defiance like Savitri's, but by a quiet, unspoken pain that runs deep. Kamini's husband, Prince Siddhartha, embarks on a journey toward spiritual enlightenment, seeking renunciation of worldly desires in his quest for transcendence. But, still, this pilgrimage leaves Kamini in the dark regarding his choice. Her life unfolds emotionally as she is faced with the void Siddhartha's withdrawal creates. She is rejected by society in the classical sense, but by the very same metaphysical decisions of the man she loves.

Kamini's internal conflict is a reflection of the existential loneliness that many women face in the shadow of male pursuits. While Siddhartha seeks enlightenment, Kamini is left to grapple with a sense of loss not just of him, but of her own identity in a world where her needs are secondary to the metaphysical journeys of men. Her pain is not rumbustious protest, but pain of a woman whose worth is questioned by a world that did not value women's emotional work on the same plane as it hallowed men's spiritual paths. Kamini is not opposed to Siddhartha's search for meaning, but she questions whether her own emotional and spiritual needs can ever be considered as worthy of note.

The dismal nature of Kamini arises due to the absence of any form of resolution. She is neither a victim in the traditional sense nor an assertive challenger. Instead, Kamini embodies a complex and largely invisible suffering, the kind that is often overlooked in narratives dominated by male spiritual or philosophical journeys. Her



dialogues are poignant and philosophical, reflecting her inner turmoil. They reveal the gendered nature of spiritual narratives, where women's emotional and existential needs are rarely seen as significant in the grand narrative of male enlightenment.

Kamini's journey is a quiet one, filled with questions about her place in a world that values male transcendence over female emotionality. She becomes a symbol of the unacknowledged emotional labor of women and the tragic cost of loving someone who chooses a path that leaves you adrift. Her pain is not just a personal one, but an existential reflection of a broader societal indifference toward the lives and struggles of women.

Through Kamini, Rakesh invites us to reconsider the spiritual and emotional narratives that have historically been told through male lenses, and to see the human cost of those narratives from a woman's perspective. Her story is not one of defiance, but of quiet, unbearable longing for love, for recognition, and for the validation of her own desires. And in this yearning, Kamini's tragic beauty lies.

Themes and Techniques

1. Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity

One of the dominant strands in Mohan Rakesh's plays is the unspoken but fierce battle between tradition and modernity. His women are usually at this juncture urged to be patient, self-denying, and family-oriented, yet drawn by an inner compulsion towards personal freedom. This tension within them does not always break out; instead, it seethes beneath the surface, manifesting as restlessness, frustration, or silent withdrawal. Rakesh doesn't simply show us this struggle he makes us feel the weight these women carry, and the silent strength that is required to challenge the roles they've been assigned.

2. Identity and Selfhood

Lying at the heart of Rakesh's plays is a subtle but potent question: Who am I, beyond what society requires me to be? Mallika spurns marriage and solitude in favor of art,



Savitri pushes back against the smothering bounds of home life, and Kamini doubts herself when abandoned for spiritual exploration. These women are not pursuing money or power talking is that they want a sense of self. They do not want to be relegated solely to being wives or mothers; they desire to be complete, multifaceted beings. Through them, Rakesh records a silent revolution a profound hunger for identity, dignity, and emotional reality.

3. Alienation and Repression

Even as strong women, Rakesh's female characters tend to have a profound, haunting loneliness emotional, spiritual, and quietly insistent. Mallika is physically abandoned by Kalidas; Savitri, surrounded by family, feels invisible and unheard; Kamini is emotionally abandoned as Siddhartha withdraws into silence. Rakesh expresses this isolation through broken dialogue, endless silences, and subtle gestures. These women aren't silenced by society alone; they're also haunted with internalized notions of what they should feel or think. Their alienation doesn't scream; it sneaks up and by doing so, it becomes even more effective and pathetic.

4. Realistic Dialogue and Psychological Complexity

What's most compelling about Rakesh's women is their raw humanity. They aren't ideal or symbolic they're blemished, conflicted, and richly real. Guided by pain, memory, pride, and yearning, they converse in halting, authentic voices, not in smooth monologues. They quarrel, retreat, rage, and second-guess themselves. Rakesh eschews dramatic flourish; his words reflect the way people actually speak when they're exposed or wounded. That emotional truth invites us in allowing us to hear not only what his characters say but also what they can't. In their silence and strife, they live.

Conclusion

Rakesh's women are real because they're not idealized—they're complex, flawed, and emotionally raw. They talk like real people do: sometimes broken, sometimes piercing, often tentative. They don't make speeches—they unfold themselves in pieces, silences, and explosive outbursts. By doing this, Rakesh doesn't merely tell us what they say—he allows us to feel what they can't. It's this quiet truth that makes them unforgettable.



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