

Colours and Crisis:
A Study of Cosmopolitan Womanhood in Elkunchwar's
Sonata

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"The scenes of this magical city are strange.

If you come with all your root.

To live here is like magic.....

Like pain, like anguish, like tear

You are we here....."

[Gulzar, Mumbai, Neglected Poems]

Sonata, published in 2007, belongs to the third phase of Mahesh Elkunchwar's dramatic career. In this play, Elkunchwar has come to a zone which is far distant from his usual disturbing and disturbed background of his earlier plays like *Garbo*, *Desire in the Rocks*, *Old Stone Mansion*, and *Reflection*. In the context of post-globalized Mumbai, Elkunchwar focuses on three working women and weaves his symphony to show how disturbed their lives are. The chaos in their lives begins because of their moving towards menopause, mid-aged crisis. They have fantasies, unfulfilled desires, scattered lifestyle, jealousy, sense of betrayal, sense of guilt, utter bonding, and immense helplessness. The three single working women in *Sonata* - a journalist, a teacher of Sanskrit, and one employed in an ambiguous 'big' post in a multinational company share a comradeship in life with all signs of solidarity and freedom. Aruna and Dolon have been sharing the same apartment for seventeen years. Subhadra once their apartment mate, now lives a disturbed conjugal life and comes to visit them on the particular day on which the play's action takes place. They are all in their forties; they were classmates in college. Aruna belongs to conservative Marathi origin, Dolon in her origin is a 'Calcutta liberal' Bengali, and Subhadra's origin is in North India. In the heights of Mumbai skyscrapers with a sense of cocooned security their entity is so precarious, fragile, and desperate that they always fear to lose one another, even one's own self. With this setting, Elkunchwar explores different shades of

womanhood in modern cosmopolitan life. This treatment is different from the typically known Elkunchwaresque treatment as it is not a male dominated world like his earlier plays; it is rather, a complete all-women drama to explore the issue of multiplicity through different shades of womanhood. Sathe, in this point, observes,

In *Sonata*, the Marathi Brahmin of Nagpur tries to use his gothic, anarchic Vidharbha in the sophisticated cityscape of Bombay which is not Garboesque Bombay, but Mumbai of polished people. The symphony is helplessly melancholic and helplessly human. Here we find how the genius a highly educated feudal creates his women in cityscape (341).

In this context, this paper tries to find the colours and crisis of modern cosmopolitan womanhood.

Sonata deeply explores into the lives of these three friends who are seemingly lost. Dolon and Aruna have been in the same flat for the past seventeen years. Yet it is quite evident that they have been continuously rejecting each other. There are a few reasons behind it. Dolon with her dazzling and spirited character on the exterior is but a buried loneliness in the interior. She becomes the symbol of those contemporary women living the very kind of life which is multiple within its singular existence. On the other hand, Aruna, who has been psychologically hurt by her lover, is a reserved sulky school teacher and symbolizes such women who are never at balance and blame all men for the miseries and suppression of the whole women folk. We find another type through Subhadra. She is the third woman who conceals the reality that she is tortured and physically assaulted by her pro-masculine lover. She is dissatisfied to the core, but tries to project herself as the utmost happy woman of the world. Thus she symbolizes the women, who, under no situation can think of living without a male counterpart. These kinds of women, in spite of all the tortures keep returning to their oppressive male partners rather than risking a safe and descent life alone. So a sense of multiplicity runs through the difference of their characters.

The issue of cosmopolitanism becomes quite prominent when the women in *Sonata* give the glimpses of their roots. They keep returning to the nostalgic memories of their past lives and quietly trace the routes of their being to the roots

of the small towns they grew up in once. Aruna, who seems to be an icy cold untouched woman, shares her yearning of going home with Dolon:

Aruna - I'm planning to go home next week.

Dolon - Sure.

Aruna - Twenty five years in Mumbai but I still think of home".(251-2).

Aruna has a strong desire to go back home but somehow she does not go home. She recalls her nephews and nieces and asks Dolon to join her for her visit to her home town. She, almost in a monologue, says to Dolon: "Let's go for a few days..... My nephews and nieces will dance around you with joy. Dolon mawshi, Dolon mawshi....." (252). In this context, when Dolon asks Aruna the age of her nephews and nieces, Aruna is not able to recall it properly: "The youngest is five, I think.....or six maybe....." (252). At his Dolon remarks "You don't even remember that..... You always say you'll go. You never do...." (252). Aruna has been disillusioned by the harsh reality of society. In spite of the desire of going back home, she knows very well that she cannot return home because nobody at her home wants her to return. When we find Dolon speaking about their forlorn typist neighbour, her repetitive life style, and feeling surprised that the latter had someone somewhere who might send her a postcard; we hear Aruna indulged in recalling:

The roof is leaking. Need money for repairs. Mother sinking rapidly. Losing her vision too. Wonder if you can take her in for a few days? But failed again. We want to send him to a computer class. But where is the money, with all these expenses? This year Ganesh festival will be a poor affair. You mustn't tire yourself and come here (255).

Elkunchwar has pointed out impersonal relationships in the play *Sonata* where the three women believe that the most significant part of their emotional life lies within themselves. They are more protected with each other but less connected to each other. They live at a time when their friendship becomes both all and nothing at all. Their relationships are connected in terms of which they are understood and measured, at the same time, dissolved in the same. They pretend to be satisfied as they have established a so called close relationship with each other, which they think is the major contribution to their happiness. They might

be the best friends living together for years, but each has her own private self hidden from the other. As Samik Bandyopadhyay writes,

The vulnerability and delicacy of the relationship among the three is played and simultaneously in terms of the continuing shifts in position and the private obsessions that they cherish and project to hide their raw sores, for example, Dolon's bottles of male ala Stanley Kowalski, and Aruna's intellectual- creative pretensions are obsessions that manifest themselves in intensely private spaces, often with a touch of poetry, as when Dolon turns Aruna into veiled beauty and "adores" her, visualizing a secret, unspoken desire (Elkunchwar xxix).

Nonetheless, their relationships are revealed as a psychodrama when there is an interaction between Dolon and Aruna. Though the two women have been living together for the past seventeen years, yet there is some unspoken distance between them. Time to time Dolon is eaten up by an inner guilt and many a times we hear her repenting it. But Dolon cannot take the cold, uncaring and devoid of emotions, attitude from Aruna. She is heard telling her: "You can live in the past tense all you like. Not me.....Why are you so intentionally cruel to me?" (260). Furthermore, Dolon also accuses Aruna that she had hijacked her life, when the latter wrote her short story that was awarded, Dolon thinks that the story is based on her. Infuriated Dolon also tells Aruna that the title of the story was inappropriate. Betrayal would have been a better title (278). It seems as if it is Dolon's guilt that makes her think that the story is based on her because Aruna clearly tells her that it is not Dolon who is the woman of the story: "That woman is not you. May be some similarities-only a few externalities?" (279). Nevertheless, Dolon does not believe her: "Don't give me that bullshit." (279). She is so exasperated that she is ready to leave the flat but then Aruna tries to calm her down and the two friends come to reconciliation once again only after some time we hear Dolon admitting the truth that she had slept with Aruna's lover the same night the latter had broken up the relationship

I have betrayed you.....You and Avi parted ways on that day. And your said to me, "Go, be with him". I can manage myself, but he is being ripped apart.....When I came back from him, I was full of him.....And I never told you. When I went to him, he was writhing in pain. As I tried to console him-I forgot everything at that moment. Your relationship with him. Our

friendship . The happiness I got was so overpowering. When I saw you crying, I felt like covering you with that happiness.....I never met Avi after that (285).

The entire episode is handled very maturely by Aruna. She takes Dolon in her arms and says: "Enough, my precious. It is the past. Leave it behind. You needn't have told me all this. You did. So it's okay."(286).

The desire to be happy interconnects them in spite of their difference. The choric conversation in the manner of choral song breaks the conventional prototype of womanhood and we get a multi-coloured womanhood

Dolon: What awful women we are!

Aruna: We're alright. We're self-sufficient. We earn, spend.

Dolon: Self-centred. Do nothing for society.

Subhadra: Without any commitment. Without any aim.

Dolon: No ideology.

Subhadra: We're not even feminists.

Dolon: We blow money, smoke, drink.

Subhadra; And my affairs.

Dolon (giggling): Sheeree. What kind of people are we.

Subhadra: Decadent. But happy. We're happy.

Dolon: Unabashedly happy.

Subhadra: Abominably happy.

Dolon: Obscenely.

Aruna: Nirlajjam sada sukhi (271).

So the three women through all their existence represent the individuality of the modern woman. From the point of the view of the outsider it may seem that they are almost very similar to each other but as we look at them closely and observe their inside activities and conversations we find that they are very different to each other in their own ways. Their multiplicity becomes a voice against the patriarchal tendency that attempts to fix the individuality of the woman by categorizing them in typical roles. Here this trio becomes the example of Judith

Butler's term 'Woman in Process'. Butler while re-reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* deals with Beauvoir's celebrated claim that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. Commenting on Beauvoir's statement towards the end of the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes, "If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end." (33).

If we consider the trio of *Sonata* in this context of Butler's 'Women in Process' we find that the process of becoming of woman creates the individuality in Aruna, Dolon, and in some extent in Subhadra. They are not living their lives in the fixed role of 'woman', rather their process of becoming of the individuals is a process of celebrating womanhood. From the patriarchal point of view in *Sonata* it will seem that the trio is a big failure as they don't have any 'family' or a healthy 'conjugal' relationship. Any patriarch might point out that it is because they are without the help and guidance of any male, without the company of any male, that Aruna and Dolon lose their balance which is sometimes reflected in their emotional ups and downs. But if we look at the core of their heart we find that patriarchy, despite its all kinds of categorizations, cannot categorize these women within fixed roles. Thus Aruna finds Dolon as the very other to herself, Dolon finds Subhadra as the object of jealousy, Subhadra finds Dolon as the queen, Aruna finds Subhadra as short tempered, Subhadra finds Aruna as cold. So a rainbow like spectra is visible in this trio. In this way *Sonata* becomes a text of multiple shades of the womanhood in the backdrop of a modern metro life which is full of so many psychological ups and downs.

If we look at the psychological pattern of Aruna, Dolon, and Subhadra, we find that they are very different there too. The vulnerability and delicacy of the psychological relationship among the three is played out simultaneously in terms of the continuing shifts in position and the private obsessions that they cherish and project to hide their raw sores. The fetishes of them show their difference of desire, for example, Dolon's bottles of perfume and Rabindrasangeet, Subhadra's adoration to the male a la Stanley Kowalski, and Aruna's intellectual-creative pretensions are obsessions that manifest themselves in intensely private spaces. So in their patter of desire they are different to each other with a latent interconnection of similarity. In this point, Aruna and Dolon are almost 'double' in an antithetical way to each other, they are complimentary to each other not through similarity but difference. They take Subhadra and her series of 'affairs',

and the monotony of the lonely typist of their neighbourhood as the measure of reference for the sake superiority and privilege feeling that they require. Thus, psychologically, we find in them a pattern of justifying themselves. When we look at Subhadra, we can notice that her psychology is basically of an intuitional person who is never jealous of her former classmates. She, rather in a helpless way, admits that she is not that kind of deep like Aruna, or dynamic like Dolon. She has the honesty to admit that in spite of her non-working conjugal relationship, she wants to live with her lover. So there is a clear difference in the psychological pattern of Subhadra and the other two. Now, if we close in to look at Aruna and Dolon, we find that their psychological pattern is also different from each other in a subtle way. At the first wine sipping episode of Aruna, we find that the feeling of sweet and sour of Aruna becomes sour and sweet in the feeling of Dolon (272). This reversal concerning sweet and sour emphasizes the difference between the psychological pattern of Aruna and Dolon. This becomes more prominent as the play proceeds to the end as Dolon complains that the character of Aruna's award winning story is basically a perverted figure of Dolon, and whimsically admits that in the time of the turmoil of Aruna-Avi relationship she, in the name of bridging between the lovers, actually had sex with Avi. In this context, Aruna's hugging of Dolon suggests that Aruna is in balance after the purgation of writing the story, while Dolon needs this utterance desperately as her psychological pattern is not that of the composed and articulated Aruna.

By taking the ideas of cosmopolitanism proposed by contemporary British born Ghanaian American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, we can trace the function of cosmopolitan multiculturalism of womanhood in *Sonata*. Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism is comprised of two primary, and interconnected, principles. The first is that our obligations to others reach beyond the traditional associations of family, culture, and citizenship. The second component reminds us that cosmopolitanism is not an abstract concept in that it reaches to the individual level. It's not just human life that is valuable, but the particular lives that individuals lead. Here, K.A. Appiah is reminding us that the difference is not innately a barrier to his project, but rather it's the opposite, in that it is more of a catalyst. This idea advocates for multiculturalism as "Cosmopolitans think they can learn something from those they differ from, even from those they disagree with. We recognize that people have a right to their own lives: it is this connection that ties all cosmopolitanism." (Appiah 39). It is an inclusive process in which all cultures are valued with dignity and respect. Subhadra, Aruna, and Dolon

represent this cosmopolitan multiculturalism. For this, the Marathi Brahmin is ready to eat fish as the Bengali cooks it well, and the North Indian misses the flavour of Marathi rice and curry, and the trio, at the end of the play, loves to be interconnected through the French wine. In this way, *Sonata* celebrates the colours and also the crisis of cosmopolitanism at the very same time.

As Martha C Nussbaum says:

...We should value human diversity. As Appiah says, the cosmopolitan ideal includes a positive delight in the diversity of human cultures, languages, and

forms of life. This pluralism prompts cosmopolitan liberals to insist on what is called "the priority of the right to the good;" that is,

on giving first priority to structures-prominently including structures of equal liberty-that will protect the ability of people to choose a form of life in accordance with their own lights, whether cultural or religious or personal. (Nausbaum 1996).

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