



Analyzing psycho-pathological issues, split relationships and breakdown of communication in Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House*

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Abstract:

Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure* (1969), translated into English as *Halfway House*, remains one of the most searching dramatizations of familial collapse in post-independence Indian theatre. Set within a single middle-class household over roughly thirty hours, the play traces how economic precarity, unmet emotional need, and a general failure of language corrode the bonds between husband and wife, and between parents and children. This article argues that the disintegration Rakesh stages are better understood not as simple moral failure but as a form of psychopathology rooted in what R. D. Laing termed ontological insecurity, a condition in which characters, unable to experience themselves as coherent and continuous beings, seek completion through others rather than within themselves. Reading Mahendra Nath's emasculation, Savitri's restless pursuit of "a complete man," and the children's inherited dysfunction against Laing's account of the divided self and Erik Erikson's theory of identity crisis, the article reframes *Halfway House* as an anatomy of communicative breakdown whose implications extend well beyond its immediate historical moment.

Keywords:

Mohan Rakesh;
Halfway House;
Psychopathology;
identity crisis;
communication breakdown;
ontological insecurity

Introduction

Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) occupies a singular place in modern Hindi theatre as a dramatist who turned domestic space into a site of philosophical inquiry. Of his three full-length plays, *Adhe Adhure*, written in 1969 and translated into English as *Halfway House*, is widely regarded as his most formally daring and psychologically exacting work (Chakraborty 2014). The play compresses the slow disintegration of a middle-class Delhi family into roughly thirty hours of stage time, using a single, cluttered drawing room as the arena in which four adults and two adolescents circle one another in cycles of accusation, withdrawal, and renewed hostility. Critics have long recognized the play's debt to the theatre of the absurd and to existentialist drama more broadly (Khatri 2004; Chandra 2001), yet much of the commentary the play has generated tends toward paraphrase of plot and character rather than sustained theoretical engagement with the psychological mechanisms it dramatizes.

This gap is not for want of critical attention. Chandra's (2001) edited collection alone gathers more than a dozen essays on the play, and Khatri (2004) offers a book-length reading that ranges widely across theme and character. Yet both volumes, valuable as they are, tend to move quickly from observation to evaluation, noting that the family is dysfunctional or that Savitri is either sympathetic or culpable, without pausing to specify the

psychological mechanism that produces the dysfunction in the first place. This article does not propose to displace that body of criticism so much as to supply the theoretical scaffolding it has generally left implicit.

This article argues that *Halfway House* stages a coherent, theoretically legible model of psychopathology, one in which financial precarity is the occasion rather than the cause of the family's collapse. The deeper cause, this article contends, lies in the characters' inability to sustain what R. D. Laing called ontological security: the basic and largely unconscious confidence that one exists as a real, continuous, and autonomous being (Laing 1965). Denied that confidence, Rakesh's characters, Savitri and Mahendra Nath above all, attempt to secure a sense of self through others, through possessions, lovers, and the approval or blame of children. The result is not merely marital conflict but a more fundamental breakdown of communication, in which language ceases to function as a means of mutual understanding and becomes instead an instrument of injury.

The analysis proceeds in five movements. It first clarifies the theoretical vocabulary, drawn loosely from Laing and Erik Erikson, used here to describe the family's condition. It then examines Mahendra Nath's progressive withdrawal from adult responsibility, Savitri's compensatory pursuit of completeness, and the transmission of dysfunction to Ashok, Binni, and Kinni. A further section considers the play's key confrontations as instances of failed communication rather than simple quarrel, and a final section situates the play within its comparative and historical horizons, from Beckett's theatre of the absurd to the socio-economic uncertainties of India under Indira Gandhi. Read this way, *Halfway House* emerges less as a domestic tragedy of individual failing than as a study of what happens when an entire household loses the linguistic and psychological resources needed to recognize itself.

Naming the Family's Condition

Before turning to the play itself, it is necessary to specify what is meant here by three terms that recur throughout Rakesh criticism, often without definition: psychopathology, identity crisis, and breakdown of communication. Loosely used, these terms risk collapsing into synonyms for generalized unhappiness. Used with more precision, they describe distinct, related mechanisms that the play dramatizes with considerable consistency.

Psychopathology, in the sense employed here, does not refer to formal clinical diagnosis but to Laing's more phenomenological account of disturbed being-in-the-world. For Laing, psychological disturbance arises when an individual lacks a stable sense of ontological security, the tacit certainty of one's own reality, identity, and autonomy (Laing 1965). Persons who lack this certainty experience themselves as engulfed by others, as unreal, or as perpetually at risk of dissolving into whoever they happen to be with. Mahendra Nath's admission that he is "no longer hungry" and will "never be hungry again" (Rakesh 1999, act 1) reads, in this light, not as simple self-pity but as a description of a self that has stopped experiencing its own wants as real.

Identity crisis, meanwhile, draws on Erikson's account of the struggle to achieve a coherent, continuous sense of self across the roles a person is asked to occupy: spouse, parent, provider, lover (Erikson 1968). Erikson's model was developed chiefly with adolescence in mind, but Rakesh extends its logic into adulthood. Savitri's serial attachments to Jagmohan, Shivajeet, Singhanian, and finally Manoj are not primarily evidence of moral laxity so much as repeated, failed attempts to resolve an identity that has never been permitted to settle. Ashok and Binni's difficulties look correspondingly less like independent character flaws than an inherited failure to achieve identity, transmitted through observation rather than instruction. Even standard reference works register this drift in usage: Macey's dictionary of critical theory traces the currency of "identity crisis" to Erikson's clinical vocabulary before its diffusion into looser, more colloquial usage (Macey 2002), which is precisely the looseness this article aims to correct.

A caveat is worth stating plainly. Laing and Erikson wrote within a specifically Euro-American clinical and philosophical tradition, and importing their vocabulary into a reading of a Hindi play risks flattening the text's own cultural particularity, its specific inflection of joint-family obligation, gendered economic dependency, and urban middle-class aspiration in late-1960s Delhi. The claim advanced here is therefore modest: not that Rakesh was working within a Laingian or Eriksonian framework, which he plainly was not, but that these frameworks offer a vocabulary precise enough to describe patterns the play dramatizes with unusual consistency, patterns that existing thematic criticism has tended to name without fully theorizing.

Breakdown of communication, finally, names something more specific than mere disagreement. It describes the point at which language within a household ceases to carry information between speakers and

becomes instead a means of asserting dominance or inflicting injury, a pattern of symmetrical escalation in which each utterance provokes an equal and opposite retaliation rather than resolution. Juneja's long, unsparing address to Savitri in the second act (Rakesh 1999, act 2) exemplifies the pattern in its purest form: it is the most articulate speech in the play, yet it changes nothing, because by that point language in the household has lost its capacity to be heard rather than merely answered.

Mahendra Nath and the Erosion of the Self

Mahendra Nath enters the play already defeated by circumstance: the collapse of his business has cost him not merely income but, more consequentially, his sense of purpose. Rakesh is careful to distinguish financial failure from psychological collapse. Mahendra Nath does not simply lose money; he loses, in the play's own terms, his passion, his sense of adventure, and eventually his health. The transformation is total. Once the nominal head of the household, he becomes, in Savitri's recurring formulation, not even half a man, a phrase whose cruelty lies precisely in its economy.

The comparison sometimes drawn between Mahendra Nath and Walter Morel in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) remains apt, though it requires qualification. Both men occupy households in which they have become superfluous, resented by children who have learned contempt from a more capable, more socially fluent mother. But where Lawrence situates Morel's degradation within a specific class antagonism, the gulf between a miner's rough vitality and his wife's genteel aspirations, Rakesh offers no comparable external alibi. Mahendra Nath's diminishment is presented as psychological rather than sociological, a matter of eroded self-belief rather than class positioning, which is part of what makes the play's diagnosis feel closer to clinical description than to social critique.

His outburst in act 1, in which he declares himself of no use at all, an idler fit only to be kicked and bullied, and compares himself to dry rot in the house, eating away at its foundations (Rakesh 1999, act 1), is the play's clearest statement of a self experienced as already dead. The image of dry rot is telling: it locates the damage not in any single confrontation but in a slow, structural process, consistent with Laing's insistence that ontological insecurity is rarely produced by one traumatic event but accumulates through a pattern of interactions in which one's reality goes persistently unconfirmed by others.

Ashok's loyalty to his father, muted and largely wordless, offers the play's one gesture toward reparative relationship, though this loyalty does little to arrest either man's decline; if anything, it deepens Ashok's alienation from the household's dominant register of ambition and control. Mahendra Nath's periodic disappearances from the house, taken alongside Ashok's own absences, might be read less as evasion than as the family's only available form of protest, a withdrawal from a linguistic environment that permits no other kind of response.

Savitri: Autonomy, Desire, and the Search for Completeness

Savitri is the play's most complex creation, and criticism has long been divided over how sympathetically she is meant to be read. Subash Chandra's edited volume of critical perspectives on the play collects readings that range from treating Savitri as an early figure of feminist self-assertion to treating her as complicit in her family's ruin (Chandra 2001). Both readings capture something true. Savitri is, without question, the family's economic mainstay, and Rakesh does not flinch from showing the toll this role exacts: she is the one who returns from work carrying the household's daily provisions, the one who absorbs both Mahendra Nath's passivity and her children's contempt. At the same time, her pursuit of what she repeatedly calls a complete man, a partner combining ambition, vigor, and material success, reveals an identity organized almost entirely around external validation, an arrangement Erikson would recognize as identity foreclosure rather than achievement: a self defined by what it lacks rather than by what it has resolved to be.

Her successive attachments to Juneja, Shivajeet, Jagmohan, Singhanian, and Manoj should not be read primarily as moral lapse, though the play permits that reading too, so much as a repeated experiment that fails for structural reasons each time it is attempted. Juneja's speech to her in act 2 names the pattern with unusual precision: had any of these men occupied Mahendra Nath's place, he tells her, she would eventually have judged him inadequate in the same way, because the meaning of life to her lies in how many different things she can have and enjoy at once, and no single man could ever satisfy that demand (Rakesh 1999, act 2). The diagnosis is severe, and the play does not obviously endorse it, but its logic is internally consistent with the account of

ontological insecurity developed above: a self that cannot locate its own reality independently will exhaust any external source of confirmation, however promising that source initially appears.

The play's choice of name is not incidental. Savitri invokes, inevitably, the mythological Savitri of the Mahabharata, who bargains with Yama, the lord of death, to restore her husband's life. Rakesh's Savitri inverts the myth with a precision bordering on irony: rather than fighting to preserve her husband, she wishes, at moments, only for his removal from what remains of her life. Whether this inversion indicts the contemporary woman or exposes the exhausted premises of the tradition against which she is measured is a question the play leaves genuinely open, and criticism remains divided on the point (Khatri 2004). It is worth noting, at minimum, that Rakesh frames the comparison as a situation study rather than a character study, which suggests he intended Savitri's failures to be read as symptomatic of a wider condition rather than as an indictment of her personally.

A more sympathetic reading, and one that the identity-crisis framework developed above tends to support, would emphasize how narrow the available roles for a woman in Savitri's position actually were. Economic necessity forces her into the workplace, yet the play affords her no vocabulary for pride in that achievement; her competence is registered by the other characters chiefly as a further source of resentment. Read against Erikson's account of foreclosed identity, Savitri's restlessness looks less like moral failing than like the predictable consequence of a social order that grants her responsibility without granting her any correspondingly legitimate register of selfhood. This does not exonerate her conduct toward Mahendra Nath and the children, which the play is careful not to sentimentalize, but it does suggest that the psychopathology traced in this article belongs to the household's structure rather than to Savitri's character alone.

Ashok, Binni, and Kinni: The Transmission of Dysfunction

If Mahendra Nath and Savitri dramatize identity crisis in its adult form, their children illustrate how directly such crises are transmitted across generations, less through explicit instruction than through observation. Ashok, twenty-one and unable to complete his final year of study, drifts without occupation, spending his allowance and his time pursuing girls in the street. Binni, slightly older, has already left the household for a runaway marriage with Manoj, one of her mother's former attachments, only to find her new household as unstable as the one she fled; her husband accuses her of importing her mother's scandal into his home, an accusation the play does not entirely dismiss. Kinni, the youngest at thirteen, is shown discussing sex with a friend, a detail Rakesh includes not for shock value but to demonstrate how quickly the household's preoccupations descend to its youngest member.

The mechanism at work resembles what later family systems theory would describe as modeling: children reproduce not their parents' explicit values but their observed behavior, particularly under conditions of unmet emotional need. Binni's difficulty adjusting to her marital home is instructive in this respect. She has learned from Savitri a mode of self-assertion, an insistence on personal freedom, without inheriting any of the compensatory resilience that has allowed her mother, however imperfectly, to sustain the family financially and emotionally. The result is a young woman caught between an inherited restlessness and an environment with no place for it.

It would be a mistake, however, to read the children's behavior as simple imitation. Ashok's refusal to work, and the loyalty he shows toward Mahendra Nath even as he mocks him, might equally be read as an inchoate protest against the household's dominant values, an unwillingness to succeed by Savitri's definition of success. Read this way, his idleness carries a faint echo of the era's broader youth disaffection, a connection the play's translator and editor, Dilip K. Basu, has himself drawn between Ashok's indifference and the atmosphere of the 1969 Paris student unrest (Rakesh 1999). Whether or not Rakesh intended so explicit a parallel, the suggestion usefully reframes Ashok's passivity as something closer to refusal than to simple failure.

Breakdown of Communication: Language as Injury

The confrontations that structure *Halfway House* share a common shape: an accusation provokes a counter-accusation, and the exchange escalates until one party withdraws rather than resolves. Savitri's complaint while dusting the furniture, wondering aloud where all the dust comes from (Rakesh 1999, act 1), appears trivial in isolation, but its target, Mahendra Nath's passivity and Juneja's presumed generosity toward the family, registers immediately as accusation rather than observation. The pattern recurs in Mahendra Nath's

own outbursts, which alternate between self-recrimination and blame directed outward at Savitri, Juneja, and the household in general.

What makes these exchanges instances of breakdown rather than ordinary conflict is their circularity. Savitri accuses Mahendra Nath; Mahendra Nath counter-accuses Savitri; neither accusation is heard as information capable of altering behavior, only as an assault to be answered in kind. The play offers no scene in which either party listens in a manner that produces change, which is precisely what distinguishes breakdown from disagreement: disagreement presumes the possibility of resolution, while breakdown describes a system that has lost the capacity to resolve.

Juneja functions, structurally, as the one figure capable of naming this pattern from outside it, and his extended address to Savitri in act 2 is significant less for its content, much of which restates what the play has already shown, than for its form: it is the play's only sustained monologue, uninterrupted by counter-accusation. Savitri's response, an anguished demand that he simply stop talking (Rakesh 1999, act 2), confirms that even accurate, dispassionate speech cannot penetrate a household organized around retaliation rather than exchange. The scene demonstrates, more economically than any other in the play, that the family's crisis is finally a crisis of language: not an absence of things to say, since the characters say a great deal, but an absence of any shared frame within which what is said might be received as anything other than attack.

Comparative and Historical Contexts

Rakesh's affinities with the theatre of the absurd are well documented and require only brief comment here. The play's structure, opening and closing on nearly identical tableaux, Mahendra Nath entering as Savitri collapses into a chair, has invited comparison to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954), whose tramps likewise end where they began, no closer to resolution (Chakraborty 2014). The comparison illuminates something genuine about Rakesh's dramaturgy: like Vladimir and Estragon, the family here is trapped less by any specific circumstance than by the impossibility of meaningful change within the terms the play has established. Yet the analogy should not be pressed too far. Beckett's tramps inhabit an almost allegorical emptiness; Rakesh's family remains anchored in specific, recognizable social detail, a Delhi drawing room, a failed business, an examination not attempted, that Beckett's minimalism deliberately withholds. The affinity is formal and philosophical rather than aesthetic.

The play's historical moment deserves more attention than earlier criticism has generally granted it. *Adhe Adhure* was written and first staged in 1969, a year of considerable global and domestic upheaval: the aftershocks of the 1968 Paris student movement were still being felt across university cultures internationally, and India itself was navigating a period of acute economic strain and political contestation under Indira Gandhi's government, conditions that bore particularly hard on the salaried and small-business middle class from which Rakesh draws his characters. Basu's editorial commentary on the play makes an explicit link between Ashok's disaffection and the broader youth unrest of the period (Rakesh 1999), a connection this article regards as suggestive rather than conclusive. Rakesh nowhere makes the parallel programmatic, and the play's interior, domestic focus resists any straightforward allegorical reading of the family as a microcosm of the nation. What can be said with more confidence is that the economic precarity underlying Mahendra Nath's collapse would have been immediately legible to Rakesh's original audience as a feature of their own historical moment, even as the play insists, correctly, that this precarity is the occasion for the family's crisis rather than its full explanation.

Conclusion

Halfway House resists easy resolution by design. The play answers, as its own action insists, a limited number of questions and leaves a great many more open, a structural choice some critics have read as a failure of dramatic economy but that this article reads instead as consistent with its underlying argument about identity and communication. If the family's crisis stems from an inability to achieve stable selfhood, a resolved ending would falsify the diagnosis; the play's refusal to supply one is part of its coherence rather than a lapse in it.

Reading the play through Laing's account of ontological insecurity and Erikson's model of identity crisis does not exhaust its meanings, and it would be a mistake to claim otherwise. The play's feminist dimensions, its treatment of Savitri as both victim and agent, merit fuller theoretical attention than this article has been able to give them, and its socio-economic context, the specific pressures facing India's urban middle class in 1969, deserves further historicist study beyond the suggestive but necessarily limited connections drawn here. What

the psychological framework offered in this article does clarify is why the play's central relationships fail in the particular way they do: not through any single betrayal but through a slow, mutually reinforcing erosion of each character's confidence in their own reality, transmitted from Mahendra Nath and Savitri to their children with only minor variation.

A final caution is in order. The reading offered here privileges psychological explanation over the socio-economic and gendered dimensions of the family's crisis, and a study organized instead around, say, the economics of middle-class Delhi households in the late 1960s, or around a more sustained feminist theorization of Savitri's position, would necessarily draw different conclusions from the same textual evidence. The two approaches are not incompatible; they are, at most, differently weighted. What this article has tried to show is that the psychological register, too long treated in existing criticism as self-evident rather than theorized, repays sustained attention on its own terms.

Nearly six decades after its composition, *Halfway House* retains an unsettling contemporary resonance, not because domestic breakdown is a timeless subject, though it is, but because the play's account of communication collapsing under the weight of unmet psychological need speaks directly to a present in which mediated, fragmented forms of connection have, if anything, intensified the isolation Rakesh diagnosed within a single household nearly sixty years ago. The play offers no remedy for that condition. Its achievement is to have described it with unusual precision.

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