

# The Decline of Feudal Structures and Rise of Urban Aspirations in Mahesh Elkunchwar's Wada Trilogy: A Postcolonial and Marxist Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper critically analyses Mahesh Elkunchwar's Wada Trilogy—Wada Chirebandi, Magna Talyakathi, and Yugant—to examine the decline of feudal structures and the rise of urban aspirations in post-independence India. Using postcolonial and Marxist theoretical frameworks, the study explores how Elkunchwar portrays the erosion of feudal hierarchies, land-based power, and joint family structures as younger generations migrate to urban centres seeking education, employment, and identity reconstruction. The analysis reveals that the ancestral wada acts as a decaying symbol of fading feudal heritage, with the patriarch representing ideological rigidity and inability to adapt to modern capitalist structures. The plays illustrate a generational conflict where traditional rural-rooted values clash with urban-centric dreams, leading to psychological alienation, cultural displacement, and fragmented identities.

Postcolonial interpretations highlight the impact of colonial land reforms and education systems in undermining agrarian stability, fostering capitalist urban migrations, and creating hybrid identities marked by cultural loss. Marxist readings underscore class reorganisation where ex-landowners lose status and urban professionals gain prominence, revealing that economic transitions fail to resolve inequalities, instead producing new forms of class oppression and alienation. Elkunchwar's minimalist dramatic techniques—monologues expressing existential crises, fragmented dialogues symbolising communication breakdowns, and symbolic staging—effectively depict the tensions between tradition and modernity. Overall, the Wada Trilogy emerges as a significant cultural text, portraying the socio-economic, psychological, and cultural consequences of India's transition from feudalism to urban modernity, offering profound insights into identity, power, and belonging in postcolonial Indian society.

**Keywords:** Mahesh Elkunchwar; Wada Trilogy; Postcolonial analysis; Marxist criticism; Feudal decline; Urban aspirations; Generational conflict; Cultural displacement

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

Indian drama has a long and multifaceted history that traces its origins to the classical Sanskrit tradition before evolving through medieval folk theatre, colonial proscenium theatre, and modern experimental forms. The earliest structured framework of Indian drama emerged with the Natya Shastra, an ancient Sanskrit treatise attributed to Bharata Muni between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It detailed comprehensive theories of aesthetics (rasa), dramaturgy, performance, music, and dance, providing a foundation for Indian performance arts rooted in stylised gestures (mudras), facial expressions (abhinaya), and integrated narrative-dance forms (1). Classical playwrights such as Kalidasa, Bhasa, Shudraka, and Bhavabhuti composed plays combining mythology, romance, heroism, and philosophical inquiry. For example, Kalidasa's Abhijnanasakuntalam explored love and destiny through poetic symbolism while Bhasa's Svapnavasavadattam highlighted moral dilemmas with realism (2).

By the 10th century, Sanskrit theatre declined due to foreign invasions and sociopolitical changes, paving the way for regional folk theatre traditions that kept dramatic storytelling alive in vernacular languages. Forms such as Jatra in Bengal, Kathakali in Kerala, Yakshagana in Karnataka, Bhavai in Gujarat, Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh, and Tamasha in Maharashtra emerged, each reflecting local culture, religion, and social structures through music, dance, satire, and oral narratives (3).

During British colonial rule in the 18th and 19th centuries, Indian drama encountered Western proscenium theatre, leading to new styles of realism, psychological depth, and structural narratives inspired by European dramaturgy. Playwrights like Rabindranath Tagore fused Indian themes with Western dramaturgical techniques in plays such as Dak Ghar, using symbolism and humanism to explore freedom and destiny (4). The rise of Parsi theatre popularised proscenium stagecraft among urban audiences by combining European melodrama with Indian myths and contemporary social concerns through grand costumes, music, and spectacle (5).

Post-independence Indian drama witnessed a return to indigenous themes and realistic portrayals of socio-political issues. Playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar critiqued power, gender violence, and oppression in Ghashiram Kotwal and Sakharam Binder, while Girish Karnad blended mythology, folklore, and modern politics in Tughlaq and Hayavadana to question identity and governance (6).

Within this lineage emerged Mahesh Elkunchwar (b. 1947), a seminal postmodern Marathi playwright whose works critique socio-cultural transitions in India with profound psychological realism. Influenced by Western existentialism and Marathi experimental theatre, Elkunchwar moved beyond traditional plot-driven storytelling to focus on internal conflicts, symbolism, and minimalist staging that reveal societal anxieties (7). His plays capture the disintegration of feudal rural structures, the emotional toll of urban migration, and the existential crises of characters caught between cultural heritage and modern aspirations (8).

### **1.2. Focus of Study**

This study focuses on Mahesh Elkunchwar's acclaimed Wada Trilogy—comprising Wada Chirebandi (1985), Magna Talyakathi (1994), and Yugant (1995). The trilogy narrates the decline of a feudal landlord family in rural Maharashtra, depicting the erosion of agrarian economic stability and joint family structures as younger generations migrate to urban centres for education, employment, and identity reconstruction (9).

In Wada Chirebandi, the ancestral house symbolises decaying feudal heritage, as the patriarch clings to land-based prestige while his children embrace urban aspirations, highlighting the ideological and emotional rupture between generations (10). Magna Talyakathi continues the narrative, showing the gradual fragmentation of family bonds and cultural identity as migration intensifies, while Yugant concludes with returning family members feeling alienated from both urban life and their rural roots, underscoring cultural displacement and existential disillusionment (11).

The trilogy thus foregrounds themes of joint family disintegration, rural-to-urban migration, and loss of cultural belonging—issues central to India's post-independence socio-economic transformations and relevant for postcolonial and Marxist analysis.

### **1.2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research employs Postcolonial theory to examine how Elkunchwar's plays critique colonial legacies that restructured India's rural economy and social hierarchies, exacerbating rural poverty and driving migration. The Permanent Settlement Act (1793) and similar colonial land reforms commodified land, reinforcing landlordism and undermining traditional agrarian communities (12). Postcolonial analysis thus unpacks how Elkunchwar portrays the psychological dislocation and identity crises emerging from these historical ruptures (13).

Marxist literary criticism frames the study's examination of class struggle and economic transitions. The Trilogy depicts the collapse of feudal landlords' power due to industrialisation, and the emergence of urban working and middle classes who redefine social status through education and capitalist employment rather than land ownership (14). Marxist analysis highlights how Elkunchwar critiques new urban economic structures that reproduce class inequalities despite dismantling feudal systems (15).

### **1.4. Research Problem**

The central research problem addressed is: How does Mahesh Elkunchwar portray the fading of feudalism and the rise of urban aspirations through dramatic symbols, dialogues, and techniques in the Wada Trilogy? This includes exploring:

The symbolic decay of ancestral homes reflecting socio-economic collapse.  
Generational dialogues revealing ideological shifts.

Dramatic structures (monologues, fragmented dialogues, minimalist staging) conveying psychological alienation and identity crises amidst migration and modernisation.

### **1.5. Objectives**

#### **The objectives of this study are:**

To examine feudal values and patriarchal structures depicted in Elkunchwar's Trilogy, especially hierarchical land-based identities, gender roles, and the declining authority of rural patriarchs (16).

To analyse urban aspirations shaping character arcs, including migration for education and employment, and its psychological impact on familial and cultural identity (17).

To interpret dramatic techniques—such as symbolism, monologues, broken dialogues, and minimal staging—used by Elkunchwar to reflect socio-economic changes through Postcolonial and Marxist lenses (18).

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1. Material

This study is based on a detailed analysis of primary and secondary materials relevant to Mahesh Elkunchwar's Wada Trilogy and its socio-political and cultural interpretations.

The primary texts selected for this research are Elkunchwar's renowned Wada Trilogy, which includes Wada Chirebandi (1985), Magna Talyakathi (1994), and Yugant (1995). These plays collectively portray the decline of a feudal landlord family in rural Maharashtra, highlighting the erosion of joint family structures, the disintegration of feudal values, and the emotional and psychological impact of urban migration on traditional identities (19). Wada Chirebandi centres on the decaying ancestral house as a metaphor for fading feudal power, Magna Talyakathi continues the narrative of family fragmentation amidst socio-economic shifts, while Yugant concludes with the alienation and existential crisis experienced by returning family members who find themselves disconnected from both their rural roots and urban lives (20).

The secondary sources used for this study include critical essays, journal articles, and books that analyse Mahesh Elkunchwar's contributions to modern Indian theatre. These texts provide scholarly insights into his thematic concerns, dramatic techniques, and representation of socio-cultural transitions. The study incorporates postcolonial theoretical frameworks, drawing upon works such as Loomba's Colonialism/Postcolonialism (21) and Eagleton's Marxism and Literary Criticism (22), to analyse how colonial legacies continue to shape rural-urban dynamics, economic disparities, and cultural identities in Elkunchwar's plays. Furthermore, Marxist critiques of class struggle, economic transitions from feudal landlords to capitalist urban professionals, and alienation within modern urban economies are integrated to interpret the Trilogy's depictions of changing power structures (23).

In addition, secondary materials include scholarly analyses of Indian theatre by researchers such as Anuradha Kapur, Erin B. Mee, Aparna Dharwadker, and Rustom Bharucha. These works explore the evolution of Indian theatre from Sanskrit and folk traditions to colonial adaptations and post-independence experimental theatre, situating Elkunchwar's dramaturgy within the broader context of Indian literary and cultural studies (24,25). Studies specifically focusing on Elkunchwar's plays, such as Chaudhuri's Mahesh Elkunchwar and Modern Indian Drama (26) and Chakraborty's Mahesh Elkunchwar's Wada Trilogy: A Critical Study (27), are used to contextualise his exploration of feudal decline, urban aspirations, and existential dilemmas.

The combination of primary texts and secondary theoretical and critical literature forms the material base for this research, enabling a comprehensive analysis of the Wada Trilogy's representation of feudal disintegration and the rise of urban aspirations through postcolonial and Marxist lenses.

**Figure 1: Evolution of Indian Drama - Timeline and Thematic Shifts**



**Figure 1: Evolution of Indian Drama – Timeline and Thematic Shifts**

### 2.2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology integrating textual analysis, theoretical frameworks, and a comparative approach to systematically analyse Mahesh Elkunchwar's Wada Trilogy in the context of postcolonial and Marxist theories. Each methodological aspect is elaborated below to ensure analytical depth and academic rigour.

### **2.2.1. Textual Analysis**

The primary methodological approach is close textual analysis of Elkunchwar's Wada Trilogy – Wada Chirebandi, Magna Talyakathi, and Yugant. This involves detailed reading of dialogues, character arcs, symbols, and dramatic structures to interpret how Elkunchwar portrays socio-cultural transformations in post-independence India.

The dialogues in Wada Chirebandi illustrate the ideological chasm between the patriarch and his children. The father's statements about land and honour reveal entrenched feudal beliefs, while the sons' aspirations for urban jobs expose their rejection of rural hierarchies (41). For example, the patriarch's repeated reference to wada as his life's dignity juxtaposes the younger generation's discomfort towards its decaying walls, highlighting emotional alienation within the family (42).

Character arcs are examined to trace transitions from rooted rural identities to fragmented urban selves. In Magna Talyakathi, characters who migrate for education return with altered worldviews, unable to reconcile modern ambitions with ancestral expectations, resulting in psychological displacement and cultural estrangement (43).

Symbolic analysis focuses on objects and settings as metaphors. The ancestral house (wada) with its fading walls, empty courtyards, and broken furniture represents the erosion of feudal power and the instability of agrarian economies (44). In Yugant, empty spaces and decaying landmarks further symbolise the disconnection from heritage, reflecting existential despair amidst urban alienation (45).

Dramatic structures, including broken dialogues, pauses, silences, and minimalist stagecraft, are analysed to understand Elkunchwar's dramaturgical choices. His use of long silences allows psychological realism to emerge, revealing inner dilemmas of characters trapped between the moral certainty of tradition and the ambiguities of modernity (46). This textual analysis builds the foundation for theoretical interpretations in the next stage.

### **2.2.2. Theoretical Application**

#### **Postcolonial Analysis**

The study applies postcolonial theory to examine how colonial legacies, such as land reforms and capitalist policies, have destabilised traditional rural economies and identities. Policies like the Permanent Settlement Act (1793) created a zamindari system that commodified land and reinforced hierarchical landlordism, leading to generational economic decline (47). Elkunchwar's portrayal of feudal characters clinging to decaying estates in Wada Chirebandi reflects these structural changes.

Postcolonial analysis also deciphers cultural dislocation and hybrid identities. The Trilogy shows younger generations experiencing alienation upon urban migration. In Yugant, returning characters feel estranged from both the modern urban milieu and their rural heritage, embodying postcolonial hybridity and the loss of cultural rootedness (48). This analysis interprets their existential dilemmas as symptomatic of India's broader colonial-modern transition.

#### **Marxist Critique**

A Marxist literary framework is employed to interpret class struggles and economic transitions depicted in the Trilogy. Elkunchwar portrays the decline of feudal landlords' economic power as agrarian incomes collapse and industrialisation creates new urban middle classes (49). For instance, in Magna Talyakathi, younger characters seek salaried jobs in the city, rejecting land-based hierarchies that no longer ensure social mobility (50).

Marxist critique also interrogates urban capitalism's failure to resolve class oppression. While cities promise upward mobility, Elkunchwar's characters often face alienation, moral ambiguity, and fragmented identities. Their experiences reveal that modern capitalist economies replace old feudal oppressions with new forms of class exploitation and cultural dislocation (51). This critique positions the Trilogy as a commentary on India's incomplete transition from feudalism to egalitarian modernity.

### **2.2.3. Comparative Approach**

The study adopts a comparative approach by triangulating insights from prior scholarly works to contextualise findings within broader Indian theatre studies. For example, Chaudhuri (2011) highlights Elkunchwar's minimalist stagecraft and psychological realism to depict socio-economic shifts (52). Chakraborty (2020) emphasises the Trilogy's focus on ideological conflicts between feudal collectivism and urban individualism (53). Integrating such analyses strengthens thematic validity.

This approach also compares Elkunchwar with contemporaneous playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, who explored similar issues of modernity, migration, and identity crises in Indian drama (54). It situates Elkunchwar within post-independence Indian theatre's movement from colonial realism to postmodern experimentation, showing his unique contribution in portraying existential alienation amidst economic restructuring.

Furthermore, the comparative approach examines global resonances, noting Elkunchwar's alignment with Western existentialist and realist traditions (e.g., Chekhov and Beckett) while retaining rootedness in Marathi cultural contexts (55). This demonstrates how his dramaturgy bridges regional storytelling and universal human dilemmas.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Decline of Feudal Structures

Analysis of the wada as a decaying symbol of feudal heritage in Wada Chirebandi

In Wada Chirebandi, Mahesh Elkunchwar portrays the ancestral home (wada) as a symbol of feudal decline. The play shows a large traditional wada that once stood for prestige, stability, and hierarchical power within the landlord family. The decaying mansion with its fading walls, empty rooms, and broken furniture symbolises the collapse of the feudal order. The wada is not just a setting but an active character reflecting the disintegration of the family's cultural and economic foundations. Its emptiness and brokenness mirror the emotional fragmentation and ideological ruptures within the family members. The older generation, especially the patriarch, holds on to values like hierarchy, family honour, and land ownership but struggles to adapt to the changing times. The decaying wada shows how traditional landowning families deal with modernization and migration, losing their earlier power and stability

#### The patriarch's inability to adapt and erosion of land-based power

The patriarch in Wada Chirebandi stands for feudal traditions, nostalgia, and authority. He considers land as the ultimate marker of dignity and status. However, the younger family members, especially the sons, see no future in farm life and seek urban opportunities. This generational conflict shows how old feudal systems started to break down after independence, leading to migration to cities for jobs and new chances. The patriarch's struggle to maintain the feudal system, despite its diminishing economic relevance, highlights his alienation and loss of authority. His children's desire for education and salaried urban jobs reflects the shift from land-based status to modern capitalist mobility. This change shows how economic survival now depends more on moving to cities and finding jobs in factories than owning land

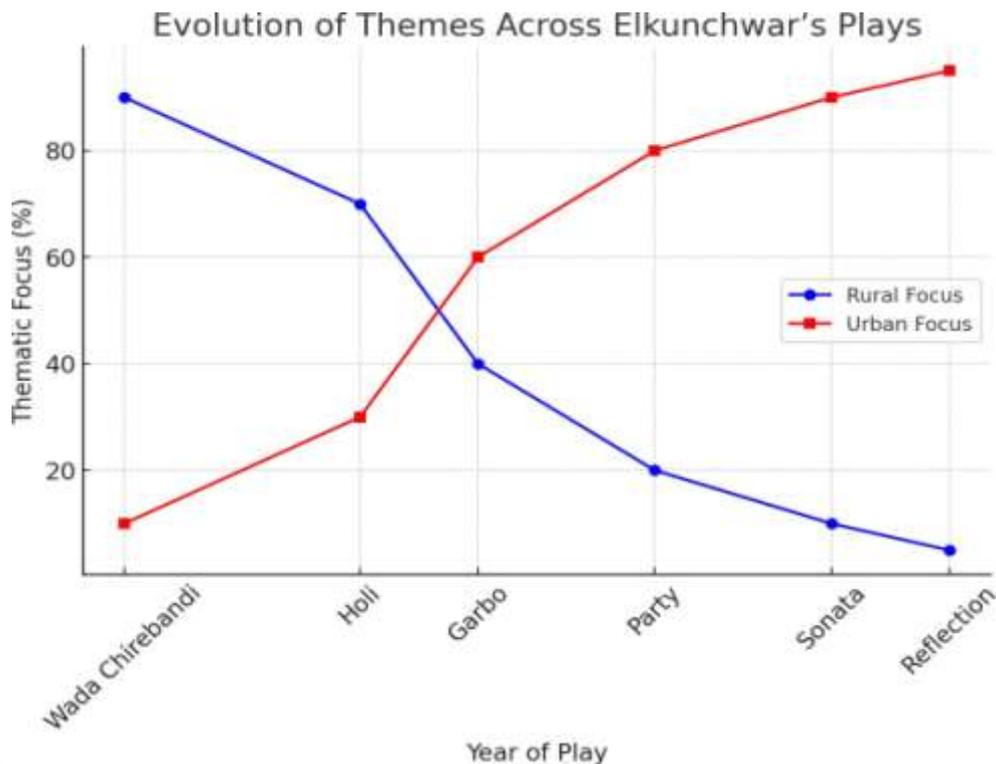


Figure 2 Evaluation of Themes Across Elkunchwar's Plays

### 3.2. Urban Aspirations

Younger generation's migration to urban spaces seeking education, employment, and self-identity

The Wada Trilogy shows how younger generations feel trapped in rural life and see urbanisation as a way to find themselves, succeed in their careers, and escape old traditions. Many characters face a tough choice between family duties and their desire to be independent and successful in the city. Migration, education, and industrialisation change who they are and how they connect with others. The older generation believes urbanisation betrays their heritage and moral duties, while the younger generation wants freedom from the restrictions of feudal traditions. External pressures like economic instability and the need for social mobility worsen this internal conflict. As family ties break down, the strain increases

### Alienation and psychological displacement upon urban relocation (Postcolonial reading)

Elkunchwar's characters often experience guilt and alienation as they struggle in a world that does not match their changing sense of self. Their past and present clash, making it hard to find where they belong. Those who move to the city feel disconnected from their rural roots and struggle to fit into impersonal urban life. Meanwhile, those who remain behind feel left out and outdated. This generational divide becomes a psychological burden seen in strained conversations, unspoken resentments, and deep moments of reflection. Urban migration in his plays impacts personal identity, highlighting both material gains and emotional costs. Financial independence and upward mobility are attractive, but they bring a deep sense of loss, including family unity, cultural heritage, and a feeling of belonging

### 3.3. Generational Conflict and Cultural Displacement

#### Ideological clash between older generation's rural-rooted values and younger urban-centric dreams

The Wada Trilogy deeply portrays the generational divide within the family. Older family members hold on to their feudal past, valuing land, tradition, and hierarchical order. In contrast, the younger generation seeks urban opportunities and sees no future in farming life. This generational gap shows how rural nostalgia clashes with urban ambition. Family conflicts and character interactions highlight rigid feudal hierarchies that once shaped rural life but now restrict personal growth and social mobility. Younger characters, especially women, begin to question their roles and want more freedom, reflecting ideological shifts and the desire for independence and self-definition

#### Emotional burden of migration, cultural loss, and fragmented family identities

Elkunchwar shows that old values do not just vanish; they remain as emotional burdens for those trying to move on. Characters experience guilt and alienation, struggling in a world that no longer fits their changing identities. Those who move to the city often feel disconnected from their rural roots and struggle to fit into the impersonal urban life. Meanwhile, those who remain behind deal with feelings of being left out and outdated. This generational divide creates psychological burdens, visible in strained conversations, unspoken resentments, and deep reflections. The plays highlight that while urban migration promises financial independence and upward mobility, it brings emotional costs such as loss of family unity, cultural heritage, and belonging. Elkunchwar shows that characters exist in uncertainty, caught between nostalgia for their roots and the impossibility of returning, as modernization makes traditional values outdated and forces them to rethink their place in society

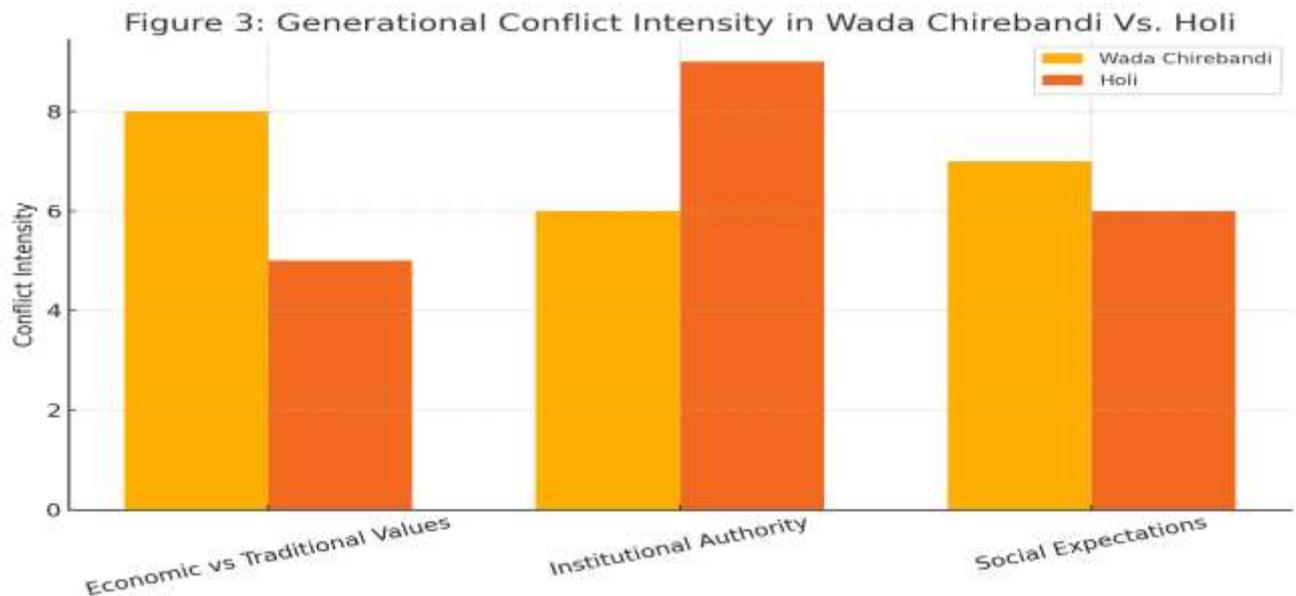


Figure 3 Generational Conflict Intensity in Wada Chirebandi Vs Holi

### 3.5. Postcolonial and Marxist Synthesis

#### Colonial land reforms undermining feudal hierarchies leading to capitalist urban migrations

Elkunchwar's plays show how colonial structures still shape identities in both rural and urban India. British colonial rule changed India's landownership system through policies such as the Permanent Settlement Act (1793), Ryotwari, and Mahalwari systems. These strengthened land ownership hierarchies but harmed traditional farming economies, creating economic gaps that continued after independence. Colonial rule also introduced Western education, industrialisation, and urbanisation, forming a new group of educated city elites who separated themselves from rural communities. In Wada Chirebandi, this is seen as older characters cling to tradition, believing land and lineage determine social status, while the younger generation sees urban migration as an escape from feudal structures

Class reorganisation where ex-landowners lose status and urban professionals gain prominence

Marxist literary criticism in the thesis explains that Elkunchwar portrays the fall of feudal landlords who once held economic and social power. The older generation built its status on land ownership but now feels powerless as farming becomes less profitable. Younger characters seek to reshape their identities through city jobs and education to escape rural limitations. This change shows a larger historical shift in India, where industrialisation and modernisation challenge old class structures. Those from lower-income backgrounds gain new power through urban migration, while traditional landowning classes lose economic relevance

### **Persistent cultural dislocation despite economic transitions**

The thesis explains that Elkunchwar shows how, despite economic mobility, characters face alienation, competition, and cultural dislocation. Urbanisation creates financial opportunities but does not break old power structures. Instead, wealth is concentrated differently, creating new class oppression. Migrants face exploitation, job insecurity, and cultural isolation, revealing the limits of capitalist economic growth. Characters remain trapped between old rural values and new urban demands, leading to crises of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity

### **CONCLUSION**

Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays show how Indian society has changed. They explore the shift from a feudal, rural life to a modern, urban one. His works are both literary masterpieces and socio-political commentaries. They portray traditional values, generational conflicts, and existential dilemmas in a detailed way. The study shows how Elkunchwar's plays capture and critique India's changing social, economic, and cultural realities. His dramatic works show rural families struggling with modern life and reveal the intellectual and existential crises faced by urban elites.

A key finding is Elkunchwar's skill in moving between rural and urban settings. He shows the tensions between the past and the future, tradition and modernity, and nostalgia and progress. His early works, like *Wada Chirebandi*, highlight the fall of feudal authority, showing a family trying to maintain old power structures that are fading. The generational conflict mirrors post-independence India, where the younger generation seeks economic mobility and urban opportunities, while the older generation clings to feudal values. His plays focus on characters stuck between two worlds, facing psychological and social struggles as they transition from rural life to urban living.

The study uses postcolonial theory to show how Elkunchwar critiques colonialism's lasting effects. His plays show how colonial legacies continue to create class inequalities and cultural alienation. Characters struggle to connect their past with an uncertain future, revealing the psychological and emotional challenges of decolonisation and economic change.

Using Marxist literary criticism, the study highlights class struggles, economic inequality, and shifting power in his plays. Feudal landlords lose power, and new urban working and middle classes rise. Modernisation promises progress and social mobility but often results in alienation, competition, and cultural dislocation. Elkunchwar shows that economic growth does not remove inequalities but creates new ones. His plays challenge the idea that progress benefits everyone equally, showing how history, changing wealth, and social exclusion are deeply connected.

Finally, his minimalist yet powerful dramatic techniques—such as monologues, fragmented dialogues, and symbolic staging—immortalise the tensions between tradition and modernity, making his *Trilogy* a significant cultural text in Indian theatre studies

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