

Existential Crises, Urban Alienation, and Modernization in Mahesh Elkunchwar's Garbo: A Dramatic and Literary Analysis

Vishwajit Marotrao Kowase¹, Dr. S M Warkad²

^{1,2}Shri. Shivaji Arts, Science & Commerce College Rajura, Chandrapur, Maharashtra.

ABSTRACT

This study analyses Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Garbo* to explore existential crises, urban alienation, and modernization impacts within modern Indian theatre. Using qualitative literary and dramatic textual analysis, the paper examines characters, dialogues, and symbolism to reveal how *Garbo* portrays educated urban intellectuals grappling with purposelessness and moral ambiguity. Pradhan, Shrimant, and Pansy live detached, meaningless lives disrupted by *Garbo*, a mysterious woman symbolising unpredictability and existential freedom. The confined apartment setting represents urban claustrophobia and psychological entrapment, while fragmented dialogues and silences depict communicative breakdown and inner dissonance. The analysis integrates existentialist theory, highlighting Sartrean notions of absurdity and alienation, and modernization theory, critiquing urbanisation's failure to provide fulfilment despite dismantling traditional structures. Comparison with Elkunchwar's *Wada Chirebandi* reveals thematic shifts from rural feudal decline to urban existential dilemmas, underscoring his critique of modernization's emotional and cultural costs. The findings contribute to literary and cultural studies by situating *Garbo* within Indian and global dramaturgy addressing alienation and modernity. This paper concludes that *Garbo* remains a timeless commentary on the fragmented identities and psychological voids embedded in urban Indian society, suggesting further interdisciplinary research on urban existentialism in Indian theatre, film, and literature to enrich understanding of contemporary subjectivities.

Keywords: Mahesh Elkunchwar, *Garbo*, existential crises, urban alienation, modernization in Indian drama

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background on Mahesh Elkunchwar as a Modern Indian Dramatist

Mahesh Elkunchwar is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and influential playwrights in modern Indian theatre. Born in 1939 in Parwa village, Maharashtra, Elkunchwar grew up in a rural environment, which deeply influenced his understanding of socio-cultural structures, feudalism, and agrarian decline in India [1]. Over his prolific career, he authored over 20 plays, blending realism, existentialism, and experimental techniques to reflect changing Indian society [2]. Unlike many of his contemporaries who focused on historical or mythological themes, Elkunchwar's works centre around contemporary societal transformations, psychological crises, and urban-rural tensions [3].

Elkunchwar's entry into theatre was shaped by his involvement with the experimental Rangayan movement in Nagpur, which encouraged playwrights to transcend traditional dramatic structures and engage with post-independence socio-political realities [4]. His works reflect influences from Western existentialist literature, especially the writings of Sartre and Camus, alongside inspiration from Anton Chekhov's psychological realism and Henrik Ibsen's social critiques [5]. Thematically, his plays often depict characters struggling with identity crises, generational conflicts, moral ambiguities, and the alienation arising from urbanization and modernization [6].

His major contributions include the *Wada Trilogy* (*Wada Chirebandi*, *Magna Talyakathi*, *Yugant*), which explores the decline of feudal structures in rural Maharashtra, and plays like *Garbo* (1982) and *Sonata* (2001), which highlight urban existential dilemmas. Elkunchwar's minimalist staging, fragmented dialogues, and symbolic realism distinguish his dramaturgy as both rooted in indigenous theatre traditions and experimental in form and philosophy [7].

1.2 Overview of *Garbo* (1982)

Garbo, written in 1982, is considered one of Elkunchwar's most profound explorations of urban alienation, artistic disillusionment, and existential crises [8]. Unlike his rural-centric *Wada Trilogy*, *Garbo* is set entirely within a single-room urban apartment inhabited by three young intellectuals and artists whose mundane and disillusioned existence is disrupted by the arrival of *Garbo*, a mysterious woman symbolising unpredictability, desire, and destruction [9].

The play centres around Pradhan, a commercial artist, Shrimant, a failed painter, and Pansy, a poet and art critic, who spend their days in meaningless conversations and self-absorbed intellectual debates. *Garbo* enters as a catalyst, challenging their constructed identities and exposing the void within their artistic and personal lives [10]. Her character,

inspired by the enigmatic aura of the Hollywood actress Greta Garbo, symbolises a force that disrupts their pretentious existence, forcing them to confront their failures, alienation, and purposelessness [11].

Through Garbo, Elkunchwar critiques the notion that urban life and artistic aspirations necessarily lead to meaning and progress. Instead, he reveals the moral ambiguity, fragmented identities, and psychological isolation inherent in modern urban societies [12]. The confined setting of the play acts as a metaphor for the characters' existential entrapment, while the fragmented dialogues and silences reveal their inability to communicate meaningfully [13].

1.3 Themes of Existential Crises and Urban Alienation in Indian Theatre

Existential crises and urban alienation emerged as significant themes in Indian theatre post-independence, reflecting the societal shifts due to industrialisation, migration, and modernisation [14]. Playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, and Mahesh Elkunchwar depicted characters caught between tradition and modernity, grappling with identity fragmentation, purposelessness, and moral dilemmas [15].

In Garbo, Elkunchwar portrays existential crises through characters who, despite being educated and artistically inclined, remain emotionally barren and alienated from society. Their conversations oscillate between intellectual arrogance and nihilistic despair, reflecting a worldview akin to Sartrean existentialism, where individuals create meaning in an absurd and indifferent universe but often fail to do so [16]. The arrival of Garbo exposes their existential void, revealing how urban intellectualism often masks inner emptiness and moral bankruptcy [17].

Urban alienation, a theme prominent in modern Indian drama, manifests in Garbo through the depiction of isolation, purposelessness, and the breakdown of authentic communication among characters [18]. While Elkunchwar's rural plays portray alienation as a result of declining feudal structures, Garbo situates alienation within the competitive, individualistic urban context, where artistic and personal fulfilment remain elusive [19]. The play thus critiques the assumption that urban modernity leads to freedom and progress, suggesting instead that it often results in deeper alienation and moral ambiguity [20].

1.4 Objectives of the Analysis

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a **dramatic and literary analysis of Mahesh Elkunchwar's Garbo to understand how it depicts existential crises and urban alienation in the context of modernization**. Specific objectives include:

- To examine the portrayal of existential dilemmas among urban intellectuals in Garbo
- To analyse the dramatic techniques (symbolism, monologues, minimalistic staging) used by Elkunchwar to depict alienation
- To interpret the characters' psychological and moral struggles through existentialist and modernization theoretical frameworks
- To evaluate the relevance of Garbo in contemporary Indian theatre as a critique of modernization and urban life

This analysis seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on Elkunchwar's dramaturgy by highlighting how Garbo expands the understanding of urban existentialism within Indian dramatic literature.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

2.1 Source Material: Garbo Text and Relevant Chapters

1. Primary Text Selection: Garbo (1982)

The main textual source for this study is Garbo, a play written by Mahesh Elkunchwar in 1982. It is widely regarded as a seminal work exploring urban existential crises and the psychological dimensions of modernization in Indian theatre [30].

2. Author Background Contextualisation

Mahesh Elkunchwar, as a modern Indian dramatist, is known for his experimental approach and thematic focus on identity, alienation, and socio-cultural transitions. His play Garbo stands out for depicting the disillusionment of urban intellectuals and artists in a confined apartment setting [28].

3. Plot and Setting Overview

Garbo is set in a single-room urban apartment inhabited by three young men: Pradhan, Shrimant, and Pansy, who are artists and intellectuals disconnected from productive life. The entry of Garbo, a mysterious woman, serves as a catalyst disrupting their purposeless existence [29].

4. Character Focus for Analysis

The characters analysed include:

- **Pradhan**, a commercial artist whose work lacks fulfilment.
- **Shrimant**, a failed painter harbouring artistic insecurities.
- **Pansy**, a poet and art critic projecting intellectual arrogance.
- **Garbo**, a woman embodying unpredictability and destruction, challenging their illusions and exposing their inner voids [30].

5. Thematic Relevance

The play's relevance lies in its exploration of existential crises, moral ambiguity, and urban alienation. It critiques the assumption that modernization and urban life lead to meaning or fulfilment, revealing instead fragmented identities and psychological isolation [25].

6. Supporting Theoretical Frameworks

The analysis of Garbo is anchored in existentialist literary theory, reflecting Sartrean notions of absurdity and purposelessness, and modernization theory, critiquing the cultural and psychological impacts of urban life [27].

7. Absence of Conventional Narrative Closure

The text is also analysed for its structural aspects, notably its rejection of conventional narrative resolutions, employing fragmented dialogues and silences to communicate alienation and inner dissonance [22].

2.2 Methodology: Literary and Dramatic Textual Analysis

1. Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative **literary and dramatic textual analysis** to explore Mahesh Elkunchwar's Garbo as a cultural and philosophical text. The approach allows in-depth examination of language, characterisation, symbolism, and dramatic structure to interpret embedded existential and socio-cultural themes [21].

2. Close Reading Technique

Multiple close readings of the play were conducted to identify nuances in dialogue, monologue, and narrative flow. Emphasis was placed on understanding subtext, psychological undertones, and how fragmented speech patterns reflect alienation and inner dissonance [22].

3. Structural Analysis

The play's structural composition was analysed to highlight Elkunchwar's departure from traditional narrative closure. Focus was placed on his use of open-ended plots, minimalist staging, and confined settings to convey urban claustrophobia and existential entrapment [23].

4. Character Analysis Method

Each character was examined for psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, and symbolic representation:

- Pradhan, Shrimant, and Pansy were analysed for their portrayal of urban intellectual disillusionment.
- Garbo was analysed as a catalyst embodying unpredictability, desire, and destruction [24].

5. Dialogue and Monologue Analysis

The study analysed dialogues and monologues to interpret existential dilemmas and moral conflicts. Fragmented exchanges and strategic silences were read as expressions of alienation and breakdown of meaningful communication [25].

6. Symbolism Interpretation

Symbolic elements such as the confined apartment, Garbo's name (alluding to Greta Garbo's mystique), and minimalist props were interpreted for their thematic roles in representing modernity's allure, moral ambiguity, and destructiveness [26].

7. **Integration of Theoretical Frameworks**

Findings from textual analysis were interpreted through existentialist literary theory to understand absurdity, purposelessness, and alienation, and through modernization theory to critique the psychological and cultural consequences of urbanisation [27].

8. **Validity and Rigour**

Rigour was ensured by systematic coding of recurring themes, cross-referencing analytical insights with established literary and dramatic theories, and maintaining interpretive consistency throughout the analysis process [28].

2.3 **Theoretical Frameworks: Existentialism and Modernization Theory**

2.4

1. **Existentialism as Analytical Lens**

Existentialism provides a critical lens to interpret Garbo's exploration of purposelessness, alienation, and moral ambiguity. Influenced by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, existentialism examines human existence as inherently absurd, where meaning is not given but must be created individually [29]. In Garbo, characters embody existential dilemmas as they struggle with disillusionment, identity crises, and the search for purpose in a modern urban context [30].

2. **Key Existentialist Concepts Applied**

- **Absurdity:** Characters confront the absurdity of life when artistic ambitions fail to provide fulfilment.
- **Alienation:** The fragmented dialogues and emotional detachment highlight urban alienation.
- **Freedom and Responsibility:** Garbo's disruptive presence challenges the men to face their freedom and moral responsibility, echoing Sartrean notions [31].

3. **Modernization Theory as Socio-Cultural Framework**

Modernization theory frames Garbo within broader socio-economic transitions from traditional to modern societies. It examines how industrialisation, urbanisation, and technological advancements reshape identities, cultural norms, and social structures [32]. The play critiques the assumption that modernization brings liberation, instead portraying it as producing alienation, identity fragmentation, and moral ambiguity [33].

4. **Intersections Between Existentialism and Modernization**

The combined use of existentialism and modernization theory reveals how Elkunchwar depicts modernization not only as a structural socio-economic process but also as a psychological and cultural rupture. Urban life, despite its promise of progress, creates existential voids and dislocated identities among individuals [34].

5. **Relevance to Indian Dramatic Analysis**

Applying these frameworks highlights Garbo's thematic complexity and positions it within global dramatic traditions addressing alienation and modernity while retaining its distinct Indian socio-cultural context [35].

2.5 **Approach to Character, Dialogue, and Symbolism Analysis**

1. **Character Analysis Approach**

Each character in Garbo was analysed for psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, and symbolic significance. The analysis focused on:

- **Pradhan**, depicted as a commercial artist trapped in mediocrity, representing urban artistic disillusionment.
- **Shrimant**, a failed painter harbouring insecurities and existential despair.
- **Pansy**, a poet and critic embodying intellectual arrogance masking inner emptiness.
- **Garbo**, the titular character symbolising unpredictability, desire, and destruction, disrupting the men's constructed realities and forcing them to confront their purposelessness [36].

2. **Dialogue Analysis Approach**

Dialogues and monologues were closely read to uncover:

- **Fragmentation:** Fragmented dialogues were interpreted as expressions of alienation and communicative breakdown among urban intellectuals [37].
- **Silence and Pauses:** Strategic silences were analysed as dramatic techniques revealing psychological dissonance, emotional detachment, and unspoken existential anxieties [38].
- **Monologues:** These were examined to understand characters' internal conflicts, moral dilemmas, and self-reflection, offering deeper insights into their existential struggles [39].

3. Symbolism Analysis Approach

Symbolic elements were interpreted to reveal thematic depth, including:

- **The Confined Apartment Setting:** Analysed as a metaphor for urban claustrophobia, isolation, and existential entrapment [40].
- **Garbo's Name:** Alluding to the Hollywood actress Greta Garbo, her name was interpreted as evoking mystery, allure, and destruction, symbolising modernity's dual nature [41].
- **Props and Minimalistic Staging:** Minimal props and stark staging were read as highlighting psychological realism and focusing attention on character dynamics and inner turmoil [42].

4. Integrated Analytical Framework

The character, dialogue, and symbolism analyses were integrated to build a holistic interpretation of how Elkunchwar communicates existential crises and critiques urban modernization within the play. This approach allowed for multilayered reading of Garbo as both a psychological and socio-cultural text [43].

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Depiction of Existential Crises in Garbo

Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Garbo* presents a profound exploration of existential crises faced by urban intellectuals and artists in modern Indian society. The play's characters embody disillusionment, purposelessness, and inner voids, revealing the psychological impact of modernization.

The three male protagonists – Pradhan, Shrimant, and Pansy – live together in a confined apartment, symbolising their entrapment in meaningless routines. Pradhan, a commercial artist, outwardly projects confidence yet internally grapples with the mediocrity of his art and lack of fulfilment. Shrimant, a failed painter, carries deep insecurities and bitterness towards his unachieved dreams. Pansy, a poet and critic, hides his emptiness behind intellectual arrogance. Their purposeless existence is disrupted by the arrival of Garbo, a mysterious woman whose presence forces them to confront their illusions.

Garbo's character embodies existential freedom and moral ambiguity. She is unbound by societal norms or artistic pretensions, exposing the men's constructed identities as hollow. Her unpredictability and defiance of moral categorisation create a crisis for the men, as she reveals their dependency on illusions to escape confronting their meaningless existence. The play's dialogues and silences highlight this crisis. Fragmented conversations among the men reflect alienation and communicative breakdown, while extended silences expose their inner dissonance and unspoken anxieties.

The confined apartment setting is a powerful metaphor for urban claustrophobia and psychological entrapment, reflecting the characters' inability to escape their purposeless lives. Elkunchwar uses minimalist staging and sparse props to intensify this existential bleakness. Garbo's presence, while initially intriguing, ultimately dismantles their constructed realities, leaving them exposed to absurdity and existential despair.



Figure 1. Original book and its Dramatic Adaptation

The figure visually illustrates the textual and performance interpretations of *Garbo*, reinforcing the analysis of existential themes within its narrative and staging.

3.2 Urban Alienation and the Psychological Portrayal of Characters

Garbo offers a critical portrayal of urban alienation through its psychologically complex characters. The confined single-room apartment setting intensifies the sense of isolation, reflecting the claustrophobic nature of urban existence. Pradhan, Shrimant, and Pansy represent urban intellectuals whose artistic pursuits and intellectualism fail to provide meaning or fulfilment.

Pradhan's alienation manifests in his disconnection from creative authenticity, producing commercial art without emotional engagement. Shrimant's bitterness towards his failed artistic career reveals the psychological toll of unfulfilled ambitions in a competitive urban environment. Pansy, despite his poetic pretensions, embodies emotional detachment and arrogance masking inner emptiness. Each character is trapped in purposeless routines, unable to form genuine emotional connections with each other.

Garbo, as a disruptive presence, amplifies their alienation by exposing the futility of their intellectual arrogance and artistic illusions. Her indifference towards moral judgement and societal norms challenges their identities, leaving them psychologically fragmented. Dialogues filled with sarcasm, mockery, and nihilistic statements reveal the characters' internal conflicts, while silences reflect emotional voids and unspoken anxieties.

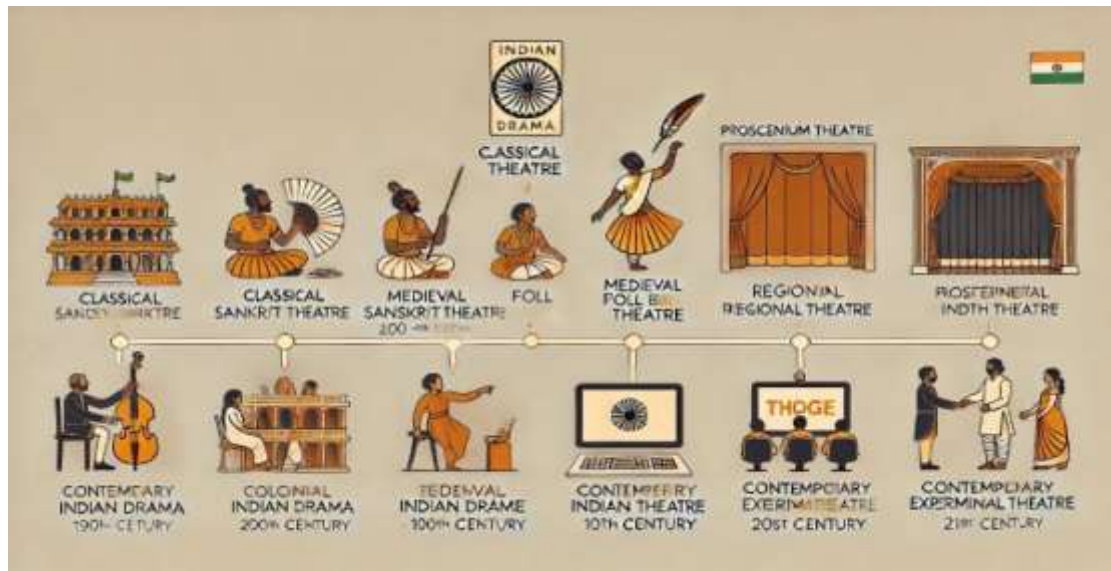


Figure 2 Evolution of Indian Drama

This figure contextualises Garbo within the broader evolution of Indian theatre, situating its urban alienation themes in modern dramaturgy.

3.3 Symbolism and Dramatic Techniques Used to Depict Modernization Impacts

Elkunchwar employs powerful symbolism and experimental dramatic techniques in *Garbo* to depict the psychological and cultural impacts of modernization. The confined apartment symbolises the claustrophobia of urban life, where aspirations, relationships, and personal identities are compressed within narrow emotional and physical spaces. Minimalistic staging with sparse props shifts audience attention to dialogues, silences, and character interactions, intensifying psychological realism.

Garbo's name itself is symbolic, evoking the mystique and unattainability associated with Hollywood actress Greta Garbo. Within the play, Garbo represents the dual nature of modernization – its allure and destructiveness. She challenges the men's moral certainties and artistic illusions, embodying unpredictability and existential freedom that destabilise their constructed identities.

Elkunchwar's use of fragmented dialogues reflects communicative breakdown and alienation, while strategic silences highlight inner turmoil, moral ambiguity, and psychological dissonance. The absence of conventional narrative closure and use of pauses create an atmosphere of existential bleakness, forcing the audience to confront the absurdity and purposelessness experienced by the characters.

This figure illustrates how symbolic elements and dramatic staging choices were visually conceptualised in performance.

3.4 Comparison with Elkunchwar's Other Works (Briefly, e.g. *Wada Chirebandi*)

When compared to Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Wada Chirebandi*, *Garbo* presents a thematic shift from rural feudal decline to urban existential alienation. *Wada Chirebandi* depicts the disintegration of a feudal family in rural Maharashtra, portraying the psychological trauma of generational conflict, fading agrarian traditions, and socio-economic decay. The play's setting in a traditional *wada* (ancestral mansion) symbolises the collapse of feudal structures and collective family identity.

In contrast, Garbo explores the existential crises of urban intellectuals disconnected from traditional structures yet unable to find meaning in modernity. While Wada Chirebandi shows alienation emerging from forced adaptation to modernization, Garbo depicts alienation as inherent within urban life itself. Characters in Wada Chirebandi are rooted in familial ties and rural legacies, whereas Garbo's characters exist in moral and emotional detachment, their identities fragmented by urban isolation and purposelessness.

Both plays, however, critique modernization: Wada Chirebandi through the erosion of rural and feudal identity, and Garbo through the moral ambiguity and psychological emptiness of urban existence. Elkunchwar's ability to depict these contrasting yet interlinked facets of modernization showcases his mastery in capturing India's socio-cultural transitions.

3.5 Interpretation through Existentialist and Modernization Perspectives

From an **existentialist perspective**, Garbo portrays the absurdity and purposelessness of human existence in a modern urban context. Characters are depicted as free to choose and define their lives yet remain paralysed by fear, self-doubt, and meaninglessness. Garbo's disruptive presence forces them to confront their illusions, mirroring Sartrean existential freedom and anguish. Their fragmented dialogues, moral ambiguity, and psychological crises reflect existential alienation in a world devoid of inherent meaning.

Through the lens of **modernization theory**, Garbo critiques urbanization's failure to provide fulfilment despite breaking traditional constraints. The play shows modernization not as liberation but as producing dislocation, emotional voids, and fragmented identities. Characters are disconnected from their roots yet unable to integrate meaningfully into modern life, highlighting how modernization transforms societal structures while failing to address psychological and existential needs.

Together, these frameworks reveal Garbo as a powerful critique of modern urban existence, where artistic pursuits and intellectualism fail to transcend alienation, leaving individuals in perpetual psychological and moral crises.

3.6 Relevance to Contemporary Urban Indian Society

Mahesh Elkunchwar's Garbo remains profoundly relevant to contemporary urban Indian society as it captures the psychological and cultural dilemmas experienced by modern individuals. Urbanisation in India has accelerated rapidly over recent decades, producing socio-economic mobility alongside heightened feelings of alienation, identity fragmentation, and purposelessness among city dwellers.

The characters in Garbo reflect a generation of urban intellectuals and artists disconnected from traditional communal structures yet unable to find meaning within modern capitalist and individualistic frameworks. Their emotional detachment, moral ambiguity, and existential crises mirror challenges faced by today's urban youth navigating professional insecurities, competitive pressures, and the breakdown of authentic relationships.

Garbo's arrival as a disruptive force symbolises unpredictable societal shifts – such as cultural liberalisation, shifting gender norms, and consumerist allure – that continue to destabilise established moral and identity frameworks in urban India. The confined apartment setting in Garbo resonates with contemporary experiences of urban claustrophobia, where physical and emotional spaces are constricted by dense city life and socio-economic inequalities.

CONCLUSION

This study analysed Mahesh Elkunchwar's Garbo to explore existential crises, urban alienation, and the impacts of modernization depicted through its characters, dialogues, and symbolism. The analysis revealed that Garbo portrays urban intellectuals grappling with purposelessness, moral ambiguity, and emotional detachment in a confined apartment setting, symbolising the claustrophobic and isolating nature of urban life. Through minimalist staging, fragmented dialogues, and the disruptive character of Garbo, Elkunchwar critiques the assumption that urban modernity leads to fulfilment, exposing instead its tendency to produce fragmented identities and psychological voids. The play's rejection of conventional narrative closure and its existentialist undertones situate it as a critical text in modern Indian drama addressing psychological realism and cultural alienation.

The findings have significant implications for understanding urban modernity in Indian drama by highlighting how modernization transforms social structures but often fails to fulfil deeper existential needs. Garbo contributes to literary and cultural studies by integrating existentialism within the Indian socio-cultural context, expanding discourses on identity, alienation, and urban life. Future research may explore comparative analyses between Elkunchwar's urban plays and contemporary Indian playwrights addressing similar themes, or interdisciplinary studies examining psychological impacts of urbanization reflected in Indian theatre, film, and literature to enrich understanding of modern Indian subjectivity.

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