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## UNIT 4 DRAMATIC FORM

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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You will read in this unit an argument about the importance and role of drama as a literary form. The discussion will focus upon the direct contact drama has with living people in surroundings that are a combination of market, neighbourhood and the closed hall or a room. Thus, words or text are not of seminal significance in drama, since drama is not to be merely read but seen and watched. More, the words, dialogues and gestures used in drama are independent of the author in a sense they are not in the case of novel or poem, for instance.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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We plan to interpret here Mohan Rakesh's *Halfway House* as a dramatic representation of life in India in the post-Independence period. For us, drama in the context would cover aspects of enactment, characterization, visualization of that which is fore-grounded and that other part which (since hidden somewhere in the background) is suggested through pauses, absences, etc. At the same time, we shall also view the broader picture of representations through other forms such as fiction. This attempt is to let the student and young scholar know that Mohan Rakesh used the fictional mode in his writing quite extensively and there was indeed a significant interaction between his novel *Andhere Band Kamre*, a number of short stories and other prose accounts that contained important biographical details on the one hand and the plays he wrote on the other. All this of course happened against a backdrop that constituted cultural and ideological life-segment of great magnitude. The present unit will provide a comprehensive view of these literary-social aspects in their combination and integrity, rooted in the belief that ideas and experiences as well as specific human responses always remain intertwined.

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## 4.2 A VIEW OF MOHAN RAKESH'S SHORT FICTION AND THE ISSUE OF MARRIAGE

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The short fiction in Hindi explored diverse processes that had emerged in urban India around the time Mohan Rakesh took to writing. In the period following Independence, industrialization became a priority project in the country with most resources spared for the productive economic sector. Thus, the direction of development in free India had become clear as rural India looked towards the city for progress and growth. Necessitating shift in population from the village to the city shook the very foundations of rural India where people had lived since times immemorial along an established life-pattern. Not only were relations within in the family redefined generally, but actual bonds between men and women as husband and wife or parent and child underwent radical change. Man and woman remained no longer interdependent in the old way, as the one active in the outside world and the other managing the household exclusively – this, as we know, being the custom in the orthodox household. A new sense of equality, togetherness and companionship became the call of the times. Was it not a welcome development? Ordinarily, it would seem so. However, in the times we are talking about, this was merely a vision, a projected idea of the emerging India that offered a new life-paradigm to men and women of the nineteen fifties. That there would be complexities, stalemates and crises was only expected since the existing scenario was too vague and amorphous to make possible and sustain visions of egalitarian living. Rakesh grappled with this issue as time passed and struggled to articulate his response to the difficulties this reality posed to him. For his achieving his objective, he would experiment with a number of prose forms in literature, fiction and drama being the dominant ones among them.

Let us take up this issue at the level of form in life. There is, for instance, a form in the household according to which segregation between males and females appears not just natural but also a feasible and useful thing. With males organizing production outside the family and women taking care of rearing children and carrying out domestic chores works out quite efficiently as the two groups seldom meet and discuss things of common interest. Boundaries remain clearly demarcated and neither party expects much from the other. Consider this form of social existence in the region of drama and you would realize that a curtain is necessary on the stage to keep the area sharply divided and 'un-intruded upon'. This form stood questioned in the nineteen fifties since a sizeable part of the female population was exposed to a changed set of priorities. In the family, an area called the living room enable men and women of the household to sit together and welcome guests that also included women. Visualize this in the context of Mohan Rakesh's short stories and his play *Halfway House* and see whether this disturbs the old arrangement and creates tensions among members of the family as well as the group of family friends. Mohan Rakesh struggled to understand and capture this new form in his fictional works and plays. Let us first see this happenings in one of his well-known short stories.

This point in the specific context of Mohan Rakesh takes us to his short story 'Ek Aur Zindagi' ('One More Life') in which the stasis as a consequence of the said change in the urban middle class existence was depicted with compelling effect. Similar to *Adhe Adhure*, 'Ek Aur Zindagi' devoted itself to the emergence

of a new form of relationships within the institution of marriage in the nineteen fifties. The reigning emotion of this story being inertia and the ensuing frustration, Rakesh's name was at the time more or less synonymous with that aspect of the 'Nai Kahani' (New Short Story) trend in Hindi that stressed in negative terms the mechanical and repetitive ways of living in big cities. Under this trend, sensitive individuals got married with stars in their eyes, so to say, since they thought that marriage in their case would become a basis of raising norms of a higher value than the one prevalent at the time. The activism that such individuals envisaged through marriage would not straightforwardly critique their environment ('parivesh') in theoretical or ideological terms but have a bearing on the conditions around them and reflect critically on the attitudes of those others who passively moved with the times. The passion of these 'sensitive individuals' out to realize themselves through a different kind of marriage was such that they remained skeptical about every detail of man-woman relationship under traditional principles of matrimony.

Would such a marriage meet their imagined goals of happiness and fulfillment was the question that lurked somewhere at the back of their minds. The form we are discussing here manifested quite differently in short fiction and drama writing. Let us try to understand the specific nature of each.

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### **4.3 REPRESENTATION OF REALITY IN SHORT AND LONG FICTION AS DISTINCT FROM THAT IN DRAMA**

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The critical distance from, if not antagonism to the environment I mention in the case of educated middle class individuals was bereft of the Romantic notion of rejecting the real world for an imaginary one; it took the alternative paradigm of individual-based matrimony literally. What is meant is that the individuals concerned shunned critiquing their world; instead they sought to live with things as they existed. In the event of failure coming their way, these individuals would be filled with bitterness, blaming the times in which they were born and indulging in self-pity. Mohan Rakesh particularly took up the case of fulfillment in marriage in new surroundings and combined the relationship with love, mutuality, honest dealing and self-assertion, only to realize in the process of living that another set of circumstances with different priorities in sight would solve the problem. In 'Ek Aur Zindagi', he dealt with these issues step by step and came to the conclusion, worked out through lived experience in the environs of art, that things in this enclosed circle remained static. But what was this 'lived experience'? The title of the short story in question pointed towards the principle of social typicality – such a marriage in Rakesh's opinion was the sole reality of the educated middle class in urban India. No wonder that the assumed heroism of the individual sacrificing oneself on the altar of self-created 'idealism' immediately appealed to many of those who felt devoid of worth in their day-to-day life. In 'Ek Aur Zindagi', this heroism belonged to the male protagonist. What about 'Adhe Adhure'? Under criticism from fellow writers and theatre persons that 'Adhe Adhure' let the male bias control the proceedings in the play, as the director Rajinder Nath has written, Mohan Rakesh consciously planned to do justice to the female Savitri in the play and gave her the long speech that we read in the later revised draft that constituted the final text of the play.

Around the same time as 'Adhe Adhure' formed itself in the mind of the author, the novel 'Andhere Bandh Kamre' ('The Dark Closed Rooms') had also been published. Mohan Rakesh gave in this novel the kind of picture of the household one saw in 'Adhe Adhure' and 'Ek Aur Zindagi' – young men and women with plans, such as educating children and helping them settle in jobs, to execute and the belief that they could indeed realize their long-held ambitions sooner or later. A temperament relying on hard work and commitment was common to these sensibilities that were scattered over the length and breadth of what was called 'New Fiction' – 'New Hindi Short Story' and the 'New Hindi Novel'. Rakesh seems to have been particularly obsessed with such characters in his own writing that were so typically present in these fictional trends of the time. Like 'Ek Aur Zindagi', for instance, 'Andhere Bandh Kamre' clearly hinted at a world that enclosed individual men and women within its rigid boundaries and prevented them from realizing their potential in life. Also, the novel went into the minute details of particular efforts and tactics that young aspiring individuals normally employ to reach their goals, only to see eventually that failure was inevitably in store for them. Was it not because the men and women involved in such struggles failed to see beyond their narrow world of home or house? It would have been a different case if the wider world outside home became socially equipped to handle issues of progress and development. This would entail socio-economic development in the vast rural space. This was not happening and the urban middle class could only focus upon their individual lives and conditions.

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#### 4.4 DRAMA AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Looked at from the socio-ideological angle of the ethos prevalent at the time, these three works of Mohan Rakesh comprised an integrated artistic unit that projected, with an incredible authenticity, the picture of the life of the middle class in Northern urban India. I stress this to tell that 'Adhe Adhure' can be properly understood only when we recognize the author's serious engagement with a social trend that was new, attractive and challenging, howsoever present-centered or regressive it may have been. Rakesh seems to have given so much imaginative thought to this aspect of contemporary social life that through the motions of the different characters in 'Adhe Adhure', he provides vital clues to the unfolding 'meaning' (the words 'arth', 'arthavatta', 'sarthakta', etc. formed an important part of the critical vocabulary of the period) of life in the new circumstance. In this respect, Mahendranath and Savitri seem constantly to refer (for the reader) to the three children – The Boy, The Older Girl and The Younger Girl – as their natural extensions, as persons that later in life would face the same predicament that the parents do now. Why? My answer is that the author meant to create through them an imaginary presence of a stifling structure, the one that he had faced at the level of imaginative re-creation in the other two works mentioned above.

Mohan Rakesh shared with his contemporaries the way society was to be looked at, examined and interpreted. This is to suggest that the post-Independence generation in India had no view of history and that the Indian National Movement of the previous decades meant little to them. The young scarcely saw any appeal in the idealism pursued by their elders whose inspiring examples were such

national figures as Gandhi, Nehru, Bose and Bhagat Singh. The Hindi writing of the fifties on the other hand resisted idealism as an abstract principle that people talked of but seldom practiced. Was there any reason why such a standpoint had emerged in the nineteen fifties? The question takes us back to the Partition in 1947 and communal riots that told a different and highly depressing story of the nationalist struggle. Communal riots of the Partition days distorted the vision of the Indian middle classes who saw in the new phenomenon of the nineteen fifties a perspective of individual fulfillment. A young man in the nineteen fifties, Rakesh contended with this development with a mixed feeling of happy expectation that Independence had produced and pain (he does not seem to have gone into the reasons of the phenomenon) that the society stood divided along religious-communal lines.

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#### 4.5 HALFWAY HOUSE AS DRAMA OF FAMILY IN MIDDLE CLASS SURROUNDINGS

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Isn't the family an important area of life where personal, social and political facets of reality interact with each other? In the light of this question, we can further take up the points dealt with in the discussion above. What did the said antagonism between the notion of a united nationhood and the politics of religious intolerance signify? In answer, we could say that the basic motivation informing human behaviour in such a case was indeed animalistic since human beings were essentially driven by instinctive urges in those circumstances. The implicit clash is felt in *Adhe Adhure* in the depiction of not just Mahendranath and Savitri but their son and the two daughters. In fact, this is the dimension that is more or less entirely missed in the appreciation of the play – the dimension in question is supposed to merely bring out the ego-centric or somewhat larger ideological differences within matrimony. What for example is the issue faced by the Older Girl in her marriage? We have a vague idea of this in the following exchange between the daughter (the Older Girl) and the mother (The Woman Savitri). To quote:

The Woman: Sit down. Tell me the truth. Is there anything ... ?

The Older Girl: No. Nothing and yet ... everything!

The Woman: For instance?

The Older Girl: For instance ... everything!

The Woman: So you mean?

The Older Girl: I mean ... that ... before I got married I thought I knew Manoj very well. But now ...

The Woman: Hmm. Is he unfaithful?

The Older Girl: No.

The Woman: Bad-tempered?

The Older Girl: No.

The Woman: Then what is it?

The Older Girl: That's just what I can't understand. I don't know what is wrong and why.

The Woman: Is he short of money?

The Older Girl: No.

...

...

The Older Girl: It's ... it's just the air we breathe ...

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...

The Woman: Well?

The Older Girl: That the longer two people live together, breathe the same air, ... the more estranged they become from one another.

...

...

The Woman: Then there must be a reason ...

The Older Girl: What reason? A cup of tea spilt from his hand or a short delay when he returns from work? These little things are not really reasons; they become reasons. A strange sort of feeling mounts up within me and speaks like poison through my whole being. Everything I touch or see or hear becomes distorted and I stand helpless and fearful under the spell of a destructive fate. But mama, I don't know why ... I just can't see why! It happens unasked, unforeseen. It ... it ... tortures me till I think I am going mad. And in the end? In the end, he too turns against me and says ...

The Woman: What does he say?

The Older Girl: That ... it's from this house I have taken something with me which prevents me from being natural. (4)

The problem discussed here by the mother and daughter is linked up with the essential nature of marriage, the way marriage turns into its opposite because of something that the two partners in it are unable to understand. In this dialogue, The Woman, being 'woman', knows more about the phenomenon but at the given moment she uses the rational discourse of economic difficulties, equality, compatibility and mutual understanding – this is what is reflected in the questions she has posed to the 'girl', a novice in the business. Also, the positioning of the Woman in this situation is that of a well-meaning questioner who has taken upon herself to resolve the contentious issue of 'making' or 'preserving' the 'home' of her daughter. On the stage, this issue is visualized as two happenings that go parallel to each other and render the significance of each other null and void.

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#### **4.6 CONCRETENESS OF *HALFWAY HOUSE* AS THEATRE**

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It is a theatrical scene in the true sense of the word – there is an interlocutor and judge in the form of the mother, the 'party' with a grievance in the form of the daughter and an audience on stage in the person of The First Man, who in fact is literally forced by the 'judge' to keep shut during the interrogation. Good theatre

this since the bigger audience in the hall watch the ‘action’ of characters caught in the situation as well as another audience in its peculiar role of trying to intervene in the matter every now and then but not allowed to do so. Wouldn’t the ‘real’ audience, too, feel the need to participate in the ‘discussion’ happening on the stage? Yet, they, too, are to merely watch the proceedings. The theatrical ‘doubling’ of the audience first and then of ‘actors’ in the scene (as *The Woman and The Older Girl* are married and discussing marriage, so would the audience wish to take an active part in the ‘session’) is so well conceived and executed that for once we entirely accept *The Older Girl*’s version of marriage – “I stand helpless and fearful under the spell of a destructive fate”. Interestingly, *Halfway House* has deployed the technique of democratic exchange between two or more parties but actually put one in the seat of authority and the other in that of helpless listeners or speakers who are not supposed to be taken seriously.

What one finds hard to accept in this scene is the steamrolling of the active consciousness of the characters involved. Being drama and theatre, *Adhe Adhure* is supposed to produce a clash of interests as well as exchange of views that take the characters and the audience into the wider world of marriages, divorces, relationships, struggles involved in being single in a vast patriarchal set up, etc. Something is being done at the expense of the dramatic form – a riddle is presented not through dialogue but through a series of stoppages, silences, stammerings – all merely struggles of an individual who has seen and known it all. We also note that use of the ‘poetic’ and the ‘philosophical’ – the way it has been made to serve the purpose of eliminating the ‘dialogue’ – may be appropriate for representation in other literary forms, but not in drama that is supposed to recognize and stress dichotomies, antagonisms and conflicts in actual life. If that does not happen, the world away from the theatre would lose out on its democratic ways of difference-oriented pluralism; the actual world (in which characters represented by actors and the audience live) would either stand negated or reduced to ‘inaction’ through authoritarian/ fascist handlings of uncomfortable developments. When the Older Girl says: “What reason? A cup of tea spilt from his hand or a short delay when he returns from work? These little things are not really reasons; they become reasons. A strange sort of feeling mounts up within me and spreads like poison through my whole being”, she becomes an excuse in the hands of the writer to launch an attack on ‘reason’ (“reason”, “not really reasons”, “become reasons” – the changing meaning of the word through punning reinforces the point I make) and also state that the example supporting the Older Girl’s thesis of “A strange feeling” spreading “like poison through my whole being” leaves us with no possibility to refute, or even differ with the view being presented on the stage. The use of ‘theatre’, life-like fumbings, the build-up through stoppages and interruptions work here under the logic of rhetoric that can be largely seen as ‘anti-drama’. There is rhetoric in almost every other situation in the play because of which the effect of this scene and the play as a whole is nothing but overwhelming, indeed ‘stunning’ (6).

Is the rhetoric we notice in the situations of the play integral to the text, the captured totality of the phenomenon? To answer this question, the earlier reference to the fictional works of Mohan Rakesh might help. Again, this is a question of form. The aesthetic of the short story or novel has a continuity that is equivalent to a flow, an ongoing movement from one end of the text to the other. There are, of course, instances where the direction of the fictional work with respect to its

movement is deliberately changed and its principle of ‘ongoing’ process violated. But such violations are done to problematize the literary effort and reveal the unpredictability of the ‘action’ sought to be represented in the text. The form of fiction, in its twentieth century/ modernist manifestation, however, imposes a discipline on the writer to ‘depict’, tell or ‘narrate’ (these are Georg Lukacs’s words) so that a sort of lyricism, highly subjective and forceful, asserts itself in the literary work. (7) This was particularly noticed in the short and long fiction of Mohan Rakesh where he insistently brought out that part of the modern-day living which had reached a dead end – a point in history that refused to look ahead (or back) and move. Marriages, individual friendships, living alone by artists to lead bohemian lives, etc. became significant points of reference in the new situation. All fiction of Mohan Rakesh bears testimony to the precise working out of this aesthetic principle in social existence. However, when the said aesthetic (of the ‘dead end’ situation) was used for dramatic representation in *Adhe Adhure*, it left little scope for testing, questioning/ self-questioning or placing the imagined situations in their relation with the ones actually present in the society of the time.

The descriptive aesthetic of modern/ modernist fiction disallowed any ‘dialogic’ or dramatic projection of the chosen situations. E. Alkazi has drawn attention to this aesthetic (appreciatively though) while commenting on the stage-effect in *Adhe Adhure* of a certain scene where we are faced with, as he says, “a heap of broken furniture, moth-eaten files, pieces of wood and iron, torn magazines and stinking cups and saucers.” For Alkazi, these details “intensify the atmosphere of suffocation and loneliness and become symbols of disintegrated life”(8). This in my opinion is a part of the rhetoric that drowns the submerged attitudes and counter-voices as well as differences, since the “suffocation” is built up in the scene so assertively. Another way to deal with the issue may have been to let the clashing perspectives come out in the open and use their own dramatic/ theatrical space to address the audience. In such a situation, twistings of form and excessive use of silences could be usefully done away with for capturing tones and colours of actual life evolving in the specific conditions of the nineteen fifties.

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#### **4.7 ONE ACTOR AS PLAYING FIVE ROLES IN *HALFWAY HOUSE***

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Is the employment of the technique of one actor playing all the five male roles not symptomatic of *Adhe Adhure* presenting a larger-than-necessary generalization of the marriage situation and what has been called ‘House’ in the English title *Halfway House*? Om Shivpuri, who enacted the multiple roles in *Adhe Adhures* first production in 1969 had this to say on the issue: “At one level, this play is a manifestation of similarity of the human experience in spite of the many individual shades found in it. To this end, the dramatist has relied upon the interesting experiment of making one single actor essay five different roles. If Mahendranath is replaced by Jagmohan or Jagmohan by Juneja, no radical difference would occur, for the reason that the mould of specific situation compels the individual to follow the same path as any other person would. To emphasize this, a few stage-productions began with a spotlight that was focused on a mask” (9) Coming as it does from a renowned actor and director of plays, it gives the interpretation that many in the world of Hindi theatre accept and some have contested – quite



sharply. Nemichandra Jain thought, for instance, that a narrow segment of experience was blown out of proportion to erroneously make the play's theme representative of the entire humanity. He dwelt on the point further by saying that "barring perhaps Mahendranath," no character in the play has raised the question "Who am I" in the world that s/he inhabits. This, says Jain, is in spite of the fact that the play raises the issue of identity in a big way and aims to apply universally to all men in all times(10). A bit severe, the comment does take the reader to the important question of outlook on social/ human life. Jain has also made the pertinent point that the theory or ideology of sameness in different situations may be sociologically interesting, but it does not go far in making the viewer conscious about the nature of relationships that one actually confronts in life. (All page numbers in the above discussion refer to Jain, Nemichandra, ed. Sampoorana Natak).

The difficulty, however, lies in considering the 'five-roles-one-actor' idea in the play to be a matter of technique alone. More than technique, this idea provides to the play a peculiar structure that controls all happenings and changes as well as differences marking the play. It strengthens the basic argument of this paper that the aesthetic of the rhetoric of modernist fiction stands as a wall between the understandability of human/ social life in its process of change and the stalemate that human existence is supposed to have reached in the contemporary world. Given such an aesthetic, the 'powerful' speech of Savitri stands easily countered by her final admission later in the play that she cannot exist without Mahendranath. In any case, it does not seem to matter whether she is married to Mahendranath or makes a working liaison with another of the five males in the play. Worth noting in this context is the following comment by Dilip Basu:

I think the play *Adhe-Adhure* hesitates, structurally, between the naturalistic and the absurdist.

When the same actor is seen performing in four different roles, there is in the auditorium a sense of watching a delightful game, and a positive expectation that the actor will be good enough to portray the difference in these four persons. The delight in the game subdues to a degree the claustrophobic feeling of watching a set of people within the four walls of a home where happiness, mutual relations and communication have rotted almost beyond recovery. Looking for the difference in the presentation of the four persons by one actor works in direct contradiction to a search for the essential likeness of the four men encouraged at the outset by The Man in A Black Suit. This 'likeness' is 'recognized' through our seeing the same actor continuing to perform; the recognition does not register from any similitude amongst the four men dramatically emerging from the script with any clarity. The four variations of 'Man' presented in the play do not combine to give a powerful impression of 'Everyman' systematically revealed, though The Prologue together with the naming of the characters as The First Man, The Second Man, etc. – all to be played by the same actor – do encourage such a search (The implied understanding of 'Man' in Rakesh's play, of course, is one belonging to Indian middle-class; there is some hesitation – to which we shall very soon have to respond – as to whether it is a male human being or any human being belonging to this group). (126-7).

Here, Basu has talked of ‘four’ (or five) roles that the actor is supposed to play and termed the different roles in *Halfway House* as “variations” of ‘Man’. Basu has rightly raised the issue of male and female in the context of Indian middle class and suggested that females do not belong to the category of middle class with adequate authority: there being “hesitation” on the writer’s part about an integral link (even within the educated middle class) between the sexes. Thus the gendered constructs remain fixed and separate in the play and only a secondary place is assigned to the female protagonist. At the level of form, too, whereas the male has a number of “variations”, the female is confined to the category of a single individual prone to making one misjudgment after another. Basu is justified in assessing the limited worth of Savitri under the pattern that *Halfway House* has captured and projected.

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## 4.8 LET US SUM UP

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Mohan Rakesh has used the drama form in *Halfway House* quite earnestly. Foremost among the techniques used by the writer is the assigning of five male roles to one actor. Then, even as all other characters have individual names in the body of the text (the names of characters get mentioned in the middle of the dialogues), they are referred to as man, boy, older girl, younger girl, etc. consistently. Dialogues, too, have a naturalistic air about them – close to what we come across in short or long fiction. When we keep these things in mind, an entirely different version of the depicted incidents and situations comes forth through drama perceived as theatre. Also as a result of this, the play gains in resonance and widening of appeal.

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## 4.9 QUESTIONS

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1. Explain the difference between Drama and theatre keeping in mind Mohan Rakesh’s *Halfway House*.
2. What is the significance of an actor playing five roles in *Halfway House*?
3. *Halfway House* ends at the same point where it began. Comment

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## 4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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George, K. M., ed., *Modern Indian Literature: An Anthology, Vol – Three, Plays and Prose*, New Delhi: Sahitya, 1994.

Yadav, Rajendra, ed., *Ek Duniya Samanantar*, New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1993.