
**The Theme of Quest for Self in Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Garbo* and
*Desire in the Rocks***

Soni¹

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, B.M.U., Asthal Bohar, Rohtak & Assistant
Professor of English, SGTBJ Govt. College, Taraori (Karnal)

Dr. Sanjeev Tayal²

Supervisor, Assistant Professor, Department of English, B.M.U., Asthal Bohar, Rohtak

Article Received: 16/11/2024

Article Accepted: 27/12/2024

Published Online: 28/12/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.12.134

Abstract

The *quest for self* is a key theme in literature, philosophy, and psychology, reflecting the search for identity and meaning. Jean-Paul Sartre states, “*Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself*” (Sartre 28), emphasizing personal choice. Carl Jung asserts, “*The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are*” (Jung 235). Literature often explores this struggle, as seen in Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, where the protagonist attains self-realization through suffering. Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, suggests that “*The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart*” (Camus 123), highlighting self-discovery as a continuous process. Mahesh Elkunchwar’s *Desire in the Rocks* presents this struggle through Hemakant and Lalitha. Trapped by fate and societal norms, they seek identity but face rejection and despair. Lalitha’s tragic transformation into a prostitute symbolizes lost agency. The play portrays self-quest as an endless struggle between art, identity, and survival. Mahesh Elkunchwar’s *Garbo* explores the *quest for self* through alienated characters. Three men seek meaning through Garbo, projecting their struggles onto her. However, Garbo resists their fantasies. She is objectified yet aware of her identity. Their illusions lead to destruction, proving that self-discovery cannot come from external projections but must be an internal journey.

Keywords: Quest, Identity, Self-Discovery, Struggle, Journey, Transformation.

The *quest for self* is a fundamental theme in literature, philosophy, and psychology. It refers to an individual’s journey to discover their identity, purpose, and meaning in life. This search often involves struggles with personal desires, societal expectations, and internal conflicts. Many thinkers and philosophers have explored this theme, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, personal growth, and the pursuit of truth. Jean-Paul Sartre, a

famous existentialist philosopher, states, “*Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself*” (Sartre 28). This suggests that identity is not predetermined but shaped through experiences, choices, and self-reflection. Similarly, Carl Jung, the renowned psychologist, believes that “*The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are*” (Jung 235). According to Jung, the process of individuation, or becoming one’s true self, is essential for psychological fulfillment.

In literature, the quest for self is a recurring theme in various works. Writers depict characters who struggle to define themselves against external influences and internal uncertainties. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a leading figure in Transcendentalism, asserts, “*To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment*” (Emerson 47). This highlights the conflict between personal authenticity and societal expectations. Similarly, Hermann Hesse’s novel *Siddhartha* portrays the protagonist’s spiritual journey to attain self-realization. Hesse writes, “*I have had to experience so much stupidity, so many vices, so much error, so much nausea, disillusionment, and sorrow, just in order to become a child again and begin anew*” (Hesse 92). This demonstrates that self-discovery often requires overcoming hardships and unlearning conditioned beliefs.

The theme of self-quest is also explored in existentialist literature. Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, argues that “*The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart*” (Camus 123). This means that the journey of seeking meaning, rather than the final discovery, is what gives life purpose. Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* presents a character who faces alienation and self-doubt, reflecting the pain of losing one’s identity in an oppressive world. In a broader sense, literature on the *quest for self* portrays the transformation of individuals as they seek to understand their existence and their place in the world.

This theme is significant in modern society, where individuals struggle with identity crises due to cultural, social, and personal pressures. The concept of self-actualization, introduced by Abraham Maslow, emphasizes that realizing one’s full potential is the highest human need (Maslow 63). His *Hierarchy of Needs* suggests that self-awareness, creativity, and purpose are essential for a fulfilling life. Viktor Frankl, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, writes, “*Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how’*” (Frankl 78). His philosophy indicates that finding meaning in life is crucial for personal growth and survival, even in the face of suffering.

The *quest for self* is an ongoing process that involves self-exploration, introspection, and

personal growth. It is a journey without a fixed destination, as identity continuously evolves with experiences and choices. Literature, philosophy, and psychology all emphasize that self-discovery is essential for a meaningful life. While different thinkers provide various perspectives, they all agree that understanding oneself leads to fulfillment and purpose. As T.S. Eliot writes in *Four Quartets*, “*We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time*” (Eliot 201). This suggests that self-discovery is a lifelong journey that deepens one’s understanding of existence.

Mahesh Elkunchwar’s play *Garbo* explores the theme of the *quest for self* through its deeply flawed and alienated characters. The play focuses on three men—Shrimant, Intuc, and Pansy—who are searching for meaning, identity, and self-worth in an urban world filled with disillusionment. They project their personal struggles onto Garbo, the only female character, using her as a means to define themselves. However, Garbo is not willing to participate in their fantasies. She is a woman who has been objectified and manipulated, yet she retains a bitter awareness of her own identity. The men attempt to escape their sterile lives through their imagined version of Garbo, seeing her as a source of salvation, creativity, and purpose. But their attempts to find themselves through her only lead to destruction, proving that self-discovery cannot be achieved through illusions and projections.

Shrimant, a wealthy businessman, represents the need for validation through power and control. He sees Garbo as both a sexual object and a means to affirm his masculinity. He calls her a “*Sex Machine*,” reducing her existence to physical pleasure. However, beneath his bravado, Shrimant is deeply insecure. He engages in a sexual relationship with Pansy, revealing his own conflicted desires and uncertainty about his identity. He uses Garbo to mask his own fears, believing that possessing her will give him meaning. However, his dependence on external validation prevents him from truly understanding himself. His quest for self is ultimately a failure, as he remains trapped in his illusions. When Garbo no longer fulfills his fantasies, he turns violent, stabbing her in a desperate act of control. This act exposes the emptiness of his existence, showing that his self-worth was built on a lie.

Shrimant struggles with frustration and emptiness. He tries to overcome his feelings by inflicting pain on others. He forces himself on Pansy, hoping to assert control and find fulfillment. However, Pansy rejects him, making Shrimant feel even weaker. His failure increases his frustration, and he starts hating everyone around him. His anger is evident in the following exchange:

INTUC: Come Garbo, come ...

SHRIMANT: No. Not in my house.

INTUC: Garbo.

SHRIMANT: No. Never again will anybody find sexual happiness here. (*Garbo* 61)

Shrimant cannot tolerate the idea of passion because he feels empty inside. He realizes that he is barren in both body and mind. Garbo experiences a similar struggle. She seeks validation from the Director but is ignored. In her desperation for revenge, she loses her baby and her ability to bear children. This physical loss intensifies her feelings of incompleteness.

Garbo no longer finds meaning in her life. She distances herself from Pansy, whom she once cared for. When Pansy expresses love, she responds with bitterness: "*Lovely. Charming idea. It's all very well your slobbering over me now. But it won't last long, when you grow a little older, you'll ditch me and leave, and I'll remain alone, an old hag*" (*Garbo* 58). She realizes that her existence has lost purpose. Her relationship with Pansy collapses. She pushes him away, reflecting her own self-hatred. As Jayaseelan observes, "*The boy's love for her only makes her loathe him even more. In reality, it is self-loathing*" (Jayaseelan 74). Garbo and Shrimant both fail in their search for identity. Their attempts to control others only deepen their sense of loss and isolation.

Pansy struggles with a deep sense of betrayal. Both Shrimant and Garbo use him for their own purposes. His condition is reflected in the statement: "*...Pansy charging Shrimant with homosexual assault, Garbo taking responsibility for corrupting Pansy...*" (Bandyopadhyay xiv). He feels anger and hatred toward Shrimant for assaulting him. He also detests Garbo for her emotional emptiness.

Pansy hopes that Garbo will protect him from Shrimant. However, she does nothing to help him. This shatters his belief in her. He loses his last sense of security. In despair, he thinks of ending his life but lacks the courage to do so. His illusion of Garbo as a mother figure is destroyed.

GARBO: "Don't come to my place. I'll throw you out."

PANSY: "I'll commit suicide."

GARBO: "Do it."

PANSY: “You’ve deceived me. You deceived me.”

GARBO: “This is nothing. I’ve deceived you in a much bigger way. You deserve it. (Pause.)

Listen carefully. There was no accident. I meant to kill my baby. (Pause.) Do you understand? I killed that baby.” (*Garbo* 64)

Garbo’s confession shocks Pansy. He realizes that she is not the person he thought she was. He sees her cruelty and emotional detachment. His faith in her completely breaks. He now understands that both Garbo and Shrimant have treated him as an object. This realization leaves him feeling lost, empty, and without identity.

The theme of the quest for self is central to *Garbo*. The characters struggle to define their identities and find meaning in their existence. Intuc seeks validation through poetry and love. He believes that controlling Garbo will give him purpose. He reminds her of their past love, hoping to rekindle lost emotions and regain his sense of self. They recall memories together.

INTUC: “Do you remember I once read my new poems to you?”

GARBO: “Oh yes!”

INTUC: “How fresh and untainted they seemed then.”

GARBO: “Those days were like that too.” (*Garbo* 55)

Intuc appears affectionate, but his real goal is control. He does not consider Garbo’s wishes. He sees her as a way to reclaim his lost identity. He says, “*If the body is the only truth, then let’s stick to it and make life beautiful*” (*Garbo* 61). His quest for self leads him to dominate Garbo physically and emotionally.

Intuc hopes to shape Garbo’s soul to replace his own failed dreams. “*For Intuc, it was Garbo’s soul that he was hoping to master and elevate to the point where it would take the place of his lost and frustrated aspirations . . .*” (Bandyopadhyay xv). His failures in life leave him lost. His career as a professor is unstable, and his writing career declines. His poetry collection, *Moharram Tiger* (*Garbo* 60), is rejected. He blends into the crowd, feeling invisible. To cope with his failures, he seeks control over Garbo. He believes that success in love will give him a sense of self-worth. However, his journey for self-discovery ends in disappointment. His identity remains undefined, and his need for control only deepens his inner emptiness.

Intuc, the intellectual, seeks his identity through artistic creativity. He believes that Garbo can serve as his muse, inspiring him to produce great poetry. He confesses that he lacks originality and needs her to fuel his imagination. This reflects his inability to find meaning within himself. Instead of looking inward, he depends on Garbo to give him purpose. However, Garbo is not the idealized figure he imagines. She is a struggling actress, disillusioned by the men who use her. When Intuc learns that she has aborted a child, his illusion is shattered. He can no longer romanticize her as a symbol of inspiration. His failure to create something meaningful reflects his failure to understand himself. He realizes that he has been using Garbo to escape his own creative inadequacy. His *quest for self* ends in stagnation, as he remains trapped in a world of failed ambition and artistic sterility.

Pansy, the youngest of the three, represents innocence and confusion. He views Garbo as a mother figure, seeking comfort and security in her presence. Unlike Shrimant and Intuc, his need for Garbo is not based on power or artistic ambition but on emotional dependence. However, his perception of her is also an illusion. He idealizes her as a nurturing figure, but she is unable to provide the stability he seeks. His *quest for self* is shaped by his struggle to reconcile his desires with reality. In the end, he remains just as lost as the others, unable to find a true sense of self in a world that offers no answers.

Garbo, the central character, is the only one who seems aware of the futility of their pursuits. She rejects their fantasies, offering bitter and sarcastic comebacks that expose their self-deceptions. She is neither a muse, nor a mother, nor a sexual ideal—she is simply a woman trying to survive in a world that constantly reduces her to a role she does not choose. Her abortion symbolizes her refusal to be defined by the men around her. She tries to reclaim her identity, but they refuse to let her exist outside their expectations. In the end, she is silenced—stabbed by Shrimant, the man who needed her the most. Her death signifies the failure of all their *quests for self*. The men realize that the Garbo they knew was never real. She was merely a projection of their desires, and without her, they are left with nothing but their own emptiness.

All the characters in Elkunchwar's plays face destruction. No one finds salvation. Garbo meets a tragic end. She is murdered and receives no sympathy. Even in death, she is denied dignity.

Intuc's words summarize her fate: "*Garbo's gone. Murdered. Or did she die first and was murdered later*" (Garbo 66). His statement has deep meaning. Garbo was already dead inside before she was physically killed. Her life was filled with emptiness and suffering. She lost her emotions and humanity long before her murder.

She misused her sexuality in a desperate attempt to find meaning. This ultimately destroyed her ability to feel love or compassion. She became lifeless, like a walking corpse. Her physical death only confirmed what had already happened to her soul. Garbo's quest for self failed, leaving behind only emptiness and loss.

The play ultimately reveals that the *quest for self* is not about finding meaning through others but about understanding one's own identity without illusions. The characters of *Garbo* fail in their search because they rely on external validation instead of self-awareness. Their fantasies prevent them from seeing the truth about themselves, leading to frustration, violence, and destruction. Elkunchwar presents a dark and tragic exploration of identity, showing that self-discovery is impossible without facing reality. The characters of *Garbo* remain trapped in their existential crisis, proving that the *quest for self* is a journey that many may never complete.

Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Desire in the Rocks* is a complex and deeply symbolic play that explores the human search for identity, self-realization, and meaning in life. The play focuses on the characters of Hemakant and Lalitha, siblings who struggle to understand their place in a world that isolates them. Their journey is marked by emotional, psychological, and existential conflicts that ultimately lead them toward destruction. The *quest for self* in the play is shaped by societal restrictions, personal desires, artistic ambitions, and the failure to escape predetermined roles. Elkunchwar presents this journey as both a personal and universal struggle, highlighting the tension between individuality and societal expectations.

Lalitha's quest for self is deeply tied to her past and her lineage. She grows up confined within a wooden mansion, abandoned by her adoptive father, Dadasaheb, who leaves her behind in pursuit of his own aspirations. Her isolation forces her to confront her own existence without guidance or emotional support. Lalitha is burdened by the belief that she belongs to a cursed lineage where no natural heirs survive. This inherited doom shapes her identity and limits her ability to define herself outside of these imposed restrictions. Her father's abandonment symbolizes the rejection of tradition in favor of personal ambition, leaving Lalitha trapped between inherited destiny and the desire for personal agency. Despite this, she longs for connection and meaning, seeking love, recognition, and creative fulfillment. However, the world around her refuses to acknowledge her worth beyond the curse that follows her family name.

Hemakant represents another aspect of the quest for self, where identity is constructed through artistic creation. He is a detached artist, deeply immersed in his work and willing to isolate himself for the sake of his art. His emotional detachment is a form of self-

protection, allowing him to escape the burden of personal relationships and societal expectations. However, his artistic vision is incomplete without Lalitha, who becomes the embodiment of his unconscious desires and creative inspiration. Through her, he attempts to capture an idealized form of love and beauty, shaping her into different artistic expressions. Yet, Hemakant fails to see Lalitha as a person with her own desires and emotions. His perception of her is shaped by his artistic ambitions rather than genuine human connection. This detachment ultimately prevents him from truly understanding himself, as he remains caught between artistic idealism and emotional reality.

The relationship between Hemakant and Lalitha is central to the theme of self-discovery. Their bond is complex, shaped by longing, dependence, and unfulfilled desires. Lalitha loves Hemakant deeply, but he is unable to return her love in the same way. His commitment to art overshadows his ability to form personal connections, leading to Lalitha's feelings of rejection and resentment. She accuses him of being a false artist, questioning his dedication to his craft. This conflict between love and artistic ambition reflects the struggle between emotional fulfillment and creative expression. Lalitha's desire to possess Hemakant is an attempt to define herself through him, while Hemakant's use of Lalitha as a muse prevents him from confronting his true emotions. Their inability to find balance in their relationship leads to their downfall, as they both seek validation in ways that ultimately destroy them.

Hemakant, in *Desire in the Rocks*, embarks on a journey to discover his true self. He searches for purpose and meaning in his life through his artistic pursuits. Unlike Intuc in *Garbo*, who first seeks to control emotions, Hemakant directly attempts to control the physical form. His quest for self is tied to his dream of becoming a successful sculptor. However, those around him do not understand his ambitions. His frustration is evident when he says:

No. There was no way he could have understood my obsession. (Pause.) Lali, nobody can understand the passion that stones inspire in my hands. Nobody. That's why it doesn't upset me. My world is different from yours. It's a world that is mine alone. (*Desire in the Rocks* 74)

His parents do not support his passion, which forces him to leave home. He wanders for fifteen years through "alien lands" (*Desire in the Rocks* 74), seeking artistic fulfillment. His journey of self-discovery isolates him from his family and society.

When Hemakant returns, he sees Lalitha as central to his artistic expression. He believes she embodies the perfection he needs to capture in his sculptures. His quest for self leads him to obsess over her emotions and form. He views her as a living inspiration for his art rather than as an individual with her own desires. His relationship with Lalitha becomes an extension of his self-discovery. He tells her:

“Wait. Stay as you are. You look like a self-willed palash tree flaming with red blossoms. This mood. One more mood. I'll catch it in my sculpture. You're trembling how you tremble. This trembling will tremble again in my stones. Lali, you are beautiful” (*Desire in the Rocks* 90).

His words reflect his desire to immortalize her in stone, making her a permanent part of his artistic identity. His self-exploration blinds him to the reality of her emotions and suffering.

Hemakant remains distant and emotionally detached from Lalitha. His quest for self consumes him so completely that he disregards her pain. He uses her body to achieve artistic perfection without considering the consequences. His journey towards self-fulfillment is marked by his inability to see beyond his personal ambitions. His actions are described as:

For Hemakant, it is Lalitha's body that he would like to recast in stone so that it holds perpetually the passion that he draws out of her, with all the intensity of the forbidden and the defiance that is part of it”, and “it” being the “all-encompassing force to overpower and control another being(Bandyopadhyay xv)

His quest for artistic identity leads him to sacrifice morality, relationships, and empathy. His relentless pursuit of self-discovery results in suffering for both himself and Lalitha, showing that the search for self can sometimes lead to destruction rather than fulfillment.

The destruction of Hemakant's statues by the villagers marks a turning point in his self-discovery. The statues represent his artistic vision, but their destruction forces him to confront the fragility of his creations. His identity as an artist is shattered, leaving him vulnerable and exposed. The villagers' act of violence symbolizes society's rejection of his art and his way of life. Hemakant, who once believed in the power of artistic expression, is now faced with the reality that art alone cannot define him. This moment forces him to question his existence and purpose, leading him further into despair. Lalitha, too, faces a devastating realization when she gives birth to a dead baby. This tragic event confirms her fears that she has committed an unforgivable sin, reinforcing her sense of doom. She accepts

her

fate as a woman condemned to “live in sin,” turning to prostitution as a means of survival. Her body, once a vessel for love and creativity, is now reduced to a mere commodity. This represents the ultimate loss of self, where identity is shaped by external circumstances rather than personal choice.

The rejection Lalitha faces from the village women further emphasizes the theme of societal judgment and exclusion. When she sings to a baby, she is scolded and outcasted, labeled as an unlucky and sinful presence. This rejection highlights the rigid moral structures that define social identity, where those who do not conform are seen as threats to the established order. Lalitha’s existence challenges these norms, making her an object of fear and disdain. Her exclusion from society reinforces her isolation and deepens her struggle for self-worth. Hemakant and Lalitha’s final realization that they are both sterile creators is a tragic acknowledgment of their failed attempts at self-discovery. Hemakant, once celebrated for his artistic vision, is now stoned and beaten by the villagers. Lalitha, who once believed in love and creation, is forced into a life of exploitation. Their final surrender to love and intimacy is an act of defiance against the world that has rejected them. However, even in this moment of unity, they are ultimately destroyed within the mansion that has imprisoned them for so long.

The play *Desire in the Rocks* presents the quest for self as a journey filled with conflict, longing, and inevitable tragedy. Hemakant and Lalitha’s struggles reflect the human desire for identity and recognition, but their inability to find fulfillment leads to their downfall. Elkunchwar portrays this search for self as both deeply personal and universally relevant, highlighting the ways in which societal norms, artistic ambition, and emotional longing shape human existence. The play ultimately suggests that the quest for self is a battle between the individual and the world, where personal desires often collide with societal expectations. In the end, both Hemakant and Lalitha are unable to escape their fates, leaving behind a haunting reminder of the complexities of identity and the struggles of human existence.

Thus, the present paper reflects that the theme of the quest for self is central to Elkunchwar’s *Garbo* and *Desire in the Rocks*. The characters struggle to define their identities and search for meaning in a world that isolates them. Hemakant and Intuc seek self-fulfillment through control over others. Garbo and Lalitha try to escape their imposed roles but face rejection and suffering. Their journeys reveal that self-discovery is often painful and filled with illusions. The search for identity leads them to isolation, conflict, and loss. Their tragic fates highlight the difficulty of understanding oneself in a world that imposes constraints and expectations.

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