



Women Versus Traditions In The Novels Of Manohar Malgonkar

Dr Anil Kumar Jaiswal^{1*}, Rama Shanker²

^{1*}(**Research Guide**) Asst. Prof, Department of Humanities, Shri Venkateshwara University, GAJRAULA, UP

²(**Researcher**) Department of Humanities, Shri Venkateshwara University, GAJRAULA, UP

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ABSTRACT

This research paper illustrates the concept of women and traditions in the novels of Manohar Malgonkar. Branded as an entertainer and story teller, the deeper qualities of his fiction have been neglected or unperceived by many. The various articles by commentators do not seem to bring out the merits of the author as a significant Indo-English novelist. The few researchers who have taken up his novels seem to have failed to highlight his exceptional command over the English language. A casual reading of his novels may make the reader fall in line with the biased comments made by earlier critics. It is also intended to bring out a balanced view of the greatness of the author. Succumbing to this temptation also, this attempt to study the concept of women versus tradition in Malgonkar's novels is made here. In this study I have taken up his five full-fledged and mature novels - *Distant Drum*, *Combat of Shadows*, *The Princess*, *A Bend in the Ganges*, and *The Devil's Wind*. Key words: Traditions, Inferiority complex, Anglo-Indian, Orthodox, Reminiscence, Relationship, and Domination etc.

INTRODUCTION-

The position of the Indian woman in society has been a source of inspiration for writers through ages. 'Traditionally she is worshipped as a Goddess, but socially she is degraded to the role of a slave. Besides, there is such an aura of sanctity and tradition that it is highly untenable to imagine her out of it. In a man-made society when women rebel against any injustice they are stamped bad and are promptly chastised by the men who dominate their lives. Great writers like Tagore, Sarat and Prem Chand have made a very searching study of the social, position of the Indian woman, but even they never dared to cross the boundaries of tradition, Whether it is Tagore's Bimala or Charulata, Narayan's Rosie or Kamala Marakandaya's Mira, or any other Indian heroine, it is observed that they remain strictly Indian and tradition-bound. We find a good deal of similarity in all these cases; hence it is not difficult to predict their reaction.

The post-independence novelists' attitude to women has undergone considerable change, especially in the case of writers who have come into contact with a highly westernised and cosmopolitan society. To a certain extent one can say that some of the characters of some Indian authors are faintly rebellious to conventions. This is perhaps true in the case of Manohar Malgonkar who in the course of his army career came into contact with various types of social life which in many aspects was highly westernised.

THE MAKING OF THE AUTHOR- Manohar Malgonkar is an ex-army officer and a big game hunter. Though he started as a writer of short-stories, his mettle was organized only in 1961 after the publication of his novel *Distant Drum*. Then followed his more ambitious and famous novels *Combat of Shadows*, *The Princess*, *A Bend in the Ganges*, *Spy in Amber* and *The Devil's Wind*. The secret of Malgonkar's popularity is not mainly in his style and content of his novels, though they are different from others; nor in his heroes who are as gallant and amorous as any other Indian hero, but in his heroines much rather in his women characters endowed with a rare mixture of charm, beauty, brains and strong individuality. They come from different social levels, status and even nations—but primarily they are human beings—individuals of highly inflammable nature.

Malgonkar's moral rules are elastic; yet they are rigid, like those of his regiment. Moral rules are those which distinguish between good and bad behaviour. Malgonkar proves that these rules are variable irrespective of nation and tradition, and morality is specified essentially by culture. It is difficult to think of any human activity

which was not considered wrong at one time or the other. Malgonkar exploits this varying nature of morality in his novels. Whether it is poor, uneducated fallen women who represent half of India's women population like Gauri and Mumtaz; or rich, sophisticated people like Bina and Sundari; or a tradition-bound queen of an Indian state; or the Anglo-Indians who suffer from an inexplicable inferiority complex despite their social status like Ruby and Minnie; or rich educated cultured English women like Margot and Jean – are all alike in the sense that they are rebellious. They all face different problems under different circumstances. Their attitude to morality also varies with their character.

THE STUDY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS- Malgonkar's first novel is *Distant Drum* (1961). This is mainly autobiographical and the main story is quite short without Kiran's (the hero) wartime reminiscences. The two women Margot and Bina come at the two extreme ends of the story.

Margot is the wife of Major Bob Medley, who is second command of Kiran's regiment. Bob is much older than his young lovely and vivacious wife. Nymphomaniac that she is, Margot never makes things clear for Bob and behind his continues to cast her spell on young army men specially bachelors like Kiran Garud, who make life bearable for her. Bob comes to know the whole truth about his wife, very late. Margot knows what Bob's reactions would be and for a split-second feel concerned for his life. But Bob cannot stop loving Margot, nor can he live with the fact that his world is polluted. Three weeks later he blows his brains.

A nymphomaniac's nature is as dangerous as that of man-eater. Whatever her virtues be, she cannot change her promiscuous nature. To add to this she is undaunted, dares adventures and pays the price willingly. Readers are a little surprised at the coolness with which she plays her game and they cannot help admiring her ability to make amends with life. Perhaps this is a redeeming factor in her favour. The last thing we hear about her is, that "she has become a dress designer. Doing quite well too, very well in fact.... very attractive."

Much later Kiran falls in love with Bina Sonal, captivated by her simplicity. But Bina is to be married to Arvand Mathur. The final declaration of love between Kiran and Bina is not a quick jump to intimacy, but only a confession which threatens with another unpleasant episode. Mr. Sonal refuses to have him, an army man, for his son-in-law and also gets Kiran transferred to Kashmir. Only much later he is again posted in Raniwada and he proposes to Bina, who accepts him, despite her father.

Bina is a contrast to Margot in nature and lacks her cool and calm way of taking things. She enters Kiran's life not with the deliberate authority of Margot, but with a modest and dignified aloofness which Kiran finds irresistible. She understands Kiran, loves him for what he is and admires his self-confidence and self-respect, while making herself worthy of being worshipped. There is a greater variety of characters in Malgonkar's next novel *Combat of Shadows* with Britishers, Anglo-Indians and Indians. The hero is a Britisher—Henry Winton. He carries on an affair with Ruby Miranda, the Anglo-Indian Headmistress of the school run by the tea plantations in which Henry is working. The theme of *Combat of Shadows* is reminiscent of John Masters' *Bhowani Junction* which is mainly the story of an Anglo-Indian girl's search of identity.

Ruby is neither an Indian nor a Britisher totally and her status as an Anglo-Indian is extremely embarrassing, as Victoria says in *Bhowani Junction*. "Perhaps no one but a Jew would understand what it was like to be my sort of Anglo-Indian and not even a Jew could really know".² Any sort of elevation from that state is naturally quite welcome. Ruby's sole aim is to marry a Britisher and become a mem-Sahib and she is determined to see her dream come true. Henry's sole need is physical pleasure and Ruby has much to offer in that respect with "a rare mixture of the submissiveness and surrender of oriental womanhood with the freedom and gaiety of the west..." and this is what brings them together. As G. S. Amur rightly says, "The story of Winton's relationship with Ruby is one of betrayal—betrayal of passion through fear".⁴ Henry even overcomes his partiality for his own race and establishes a very good companionship and highly satisfactory sexual relationship with Ruby. But the question of marriage never crosses his mind.

Ruby realises the futility of her dreams and schemes only when Henry returns from England married to Jean. Insulted mercilessly by Henry she swears to kill him; on Henry's part, he finds it difficult to forget Ruby and grudgingly compares her always to Jean. Though Jean suspects dissatisfaction in Henry it is not till she learns about Ruby that she realises the whole truth.

The wheel has come full circle when Jean in her attempt for a revenge, rebels against the tradition of the whites in India and their aversion to Indians and Anglo-Indians, falls in love and gives herself to Eddie, the Anglo-Indian friend of Ruby. Jean decides to divorce Henry and marry Eddie. But Eddie is caught in the cruel trap laid by Henry and dies, Broken-hearted Jean leaves her husband. "The humiliation she had made him suffer had been fully avenged; that, at least, was a score paid off with full interest. And if it had left no feeling of triumph, it had left no regrets either".⁵ Shocked and enraged Ruby succeeds in destroying Henry, with the help of Sudden Dart and Pasupati.

The failure of Ruby or even Jean, is mainly due to the thoughtlessness of Henry. He never understands Ruby, nor Jean, nor even himself. Given a chance Ruby would have proved to be a better wife, but Henry takes the wrong turn at the wrong moment. Now the question is how far Ruby's loyalty to Henry is true? Once she gives up Eddie, she is faithful to Henry, but from here onwards her portrayal is incomplete. If only Eddie reacted positively in one way or the other when Ruby goes to Silent Hill, or if the author has pictured him as a strong-willed man, then it would have been possible to make the portrayals of Ruby and even Jean more complete and truer to the atmosphere of the novel. But Eddie is made so insignificant before Henry, (like

Patrick Taylor before Rodney Savage) that it is difficult to take Ruby's words seriously when she angrily says that Eddie is always better than Henry. As nowhere in the novel there is a good assessment of Ruby's true feelings. That is why it is difficult to analyse Ruby's feelings or even her true nature.

Ruby never can take what she's lost for no fault of hers that is relationship with Henry, nor can she make amends with what she had deliberately sacrificed, that is Eddie's love. And she is too proud to regret, however selfish her motive is, and practically prevents it. This is exactly where she wins over readers' admiration.

TRADITIONS VS WOMEN- Very few books are written on Princely India, like Ackerley's *Hindoo Holiday*, E. M. Forster's *Hill of Devi*, Anand's *Private Life of an Indian Prince*, Shanta Rama Rau's *Remember the House*, etc. But Malgonkar's *The Princes* is a real treat with the grandeur of an epic and the freshness of an autobiography. It depicts the end of the royal rule in Begwad State, symbolically signifying the end of Princes as rulers in India.

In this novel for the first time Malgonkar faces a real conflict with tradition which is hitherto lurking behind culture and confusion in his previous novels.

Prince Abhay knows his mother only as the tradition-bound lady for whom the seven Satis are the sole world and who is neglected by her husband. His relationship with her is more cordial than loving.

In Abhay's own words the Maharani is a "young woman cast on the dust heap in the full bloom of youth, growing to the verge of middle age with all her womanly desires still unslaked, rebelling, refusing to spend the rest of her life shut away in a dark palace, a volatile bundle of yearnings tearing herself away from the shell of conventions. There was something pathetically heroic about it". Yet Abhay is shocked beyond reconciliation, when the queen runs away to lead her own life, that too in the light of courage kindled by none else than himself. Because with the light-heartedness civilization Abhay advises his mother to 'break away before it is too late' and to lead a life of her own. But tradition means more to him than his mother's happiness.

For the much-neglected queen her son Abhay is the only anchor in life. Just for her son's sake, she facilitates Kanakchand's education. She believes that she can make Abhay a bridge to fill the gulf between her king and herself, but she realises that it is only an illusion, and that Abhay is no longer a little boy to crave for her love. When a mother has lost everything her only consolation is her children. When she knows that they too fail her, she has nothing to care for. That is why she does not regret her elopement with the palace officer, Abdulla Jan, in whose companionship she finds her contentment of a wife and a woman. When her son unhesitatingly calls her a whore, she retorts "I was one, all these years when I lived with a man in sin. But remember I had been abandoned by my husband...but not a whore any more now that I am married...I am the wife, the lady of the house, a share in the joys and sorrows of my husband. Here I was nothing".⁷ With his shrewd craftsmanship Malgonkar makes it possible for the orthodox Maharani to denounce her royal status, dance in the night clubs and even change her religion and still not regret it—for after all a queen is a human being too.

No other novel written on princely India shows this aspect of a neglected queen's life so subtly and in an uninhibited way. In Mulk Raj Anand's *Private Life of an Indian Prince*, Ganga Dasi, the favourite concubine of Prince Vicky, runs away with another. But then she is not a queen, nor of noble birth and upbringing. Even Indira, the ill-treated wife of Vicky, keeps herself aloof from any kind of trivialities. She suppresses the main springs of her own nature and fear of scandal robs her of love and intimate companionship.

If *The Princes* is a historical document, *A Bend in the Ganges* is a document of the freedom movement and partition. Though the two heroes Gian and Debi are two equal and opposite forces occupying the major part of the novel, it is Sundari who dominates the scene.

In this novel it may be Jean that reappears as Sundari. Jean never cares to let Henry know about her activities, just as Margot in *Distant Drum*. But Sundari's revenge is two-fold. On one hand she proves to her husband that she can very well pay him in his own coin and on the other hand she shakes Gian's self-confidence for Gian's betrayal hurts her even more.

Sundari is married to Gopal under the dark clouds of her brother Debi's arrest, and the bridal couple sets off on their honeymoon. She makes futile attempts to respond passionate to Gopal's love, but in vain. Gopal's indulgence in infidelity at a crucial moment in her life, puts off the spark of faith in her and her individuality rebels against tradition. Though the revenge is very well planned and carried out even more dramatically, it does not affect Gopal as much as it does Gian. Gopal realises the gravity of the situation—but for him, fidelity is not an end in itself. But for Gian this shock is something more than he expected, for he believes that Sundari loves him. Sundari finally leaves Gopal and when Gian comes to rescue her family in Duriabad, she once again picks up on his degradation as a human being, who built his fortune on a set of monstrous lies. But she slowly realises that Gian has changed and she accepts him though grudgingly at first. From her childhood she teaches Debi to be brave and strong. But her real victory is Gian, for she succeeds in making a man out of a liar and a cheat.

A careful analysis of all these characters reveals a beautiful sentiment. Woman can seek justice and strive for happiness and she need not be tradition-bound when her own mental welfare is at stake. She has a right for happiness as a human being—whether it is a Maharani or a prostitute like Mumtaz.

CONCLUSION-

In fact Malgonkar never criticises any of his characters, not even Margot. Because in a changing world the moral code need not be different for man and woman and Malgonkar exploits this fact fully in his novels. May be his heroines are far too progressive and revolutionary but their attitude is pure and uninhibited. They want to depend upon men who ignite the very spark of life, adventure, and passion in their hearts; who lead them step by step to fulfilment, which is a tribute to their femininity.

Margot never gives a chance to others to understand her fully, for she never really cares where she stands in the lives of her men. Women, like Ruby, are misled either by their own sentiments and illusions or by others. But the Maharani, Jean and Sundari are more sinned against than sinning. It would be interesting to compare Malgonkar's women characters with those of Tagore's, for Tagore's heroines, despite of all the passionate longings of their hearts, could never dare step beyond the boundaries of accepted traditional norms of their times. But for Malgonkar's women the 'love and respect' they expect from their men is as important as their morality. When they are deprived of what they cherish most, life loses its charm for them and fades away as an unrealised dream. So the sweet revenge becomes more important and even more precious than traditional morality, for only a diamond can cut another diamond.

Malgonkar's heroines, whatever be their shortcomings, are creatures of flesh and blood. Besides they have the common characteristic of being highly individualistic and are self-possessed characters who are also true to themselves. It is not for nothing that they all rebelled against traditions and conventions. In the search for their true identity, they are not stopped by any obstacles. It is this quality that gives them the element of reality. They may or may not be unusual but they definitely have an air of realism. Their reactions to situations can be deemed natural and realistic—especially when viewed in the context of the post-independence Indian scene.

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