

Treatment of Violence and extreme sufferings in Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*

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Abstract:

Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) is a carefully written novel about India's partition, the relevance of Gandhian principles of truth and non-violence in the aftermath of Hindu-Muslim riots, the life of convicts in the Cellular jail in the Andaman islands and the movement of millions of refugees from India to Pakistan and vice-versa. Malgonkar, with a good command of English, has written the novel on a theme and in a style befitting a great work of art. One of the results of British impact on India was the rise of the Indian novel in English as early as in 1864. Indian writers of fiction adapted the Western form and medium to their own tradition of storytelling.

The story of *A Bend in the Ganges* moves from personal vendetta to national bloodshed and illustrates the unreality of non-violence and the reality of insolvency reaching its climax in the partition holocaust. It depicts one of the most violent periods in recent Indian history, the revolt against the British rule, which is handled creatively by the artistic imagination of the writer. The writer's artistic imagination works upon the historical event of the past, till the dry bones of the bygone days live once again in his pages. He has displayed remarkable fidelity to fact and on the independence, the two forces—one of Gandhi and other of Subash Chandra Bose—working for the same goal pulled in contrary directions. The result was that ideals of their different ideologies come into conflict and the young men who matured during the years of the war and the Japanese invasion of Burma doubted their own connections of the earlier years. The issues were thus complicated and created confusion and chaos. The novel starts with Gandhi's bonfire of the British clothes and ends with the violence and bloodshed that marked 'The sunrise of our freedom'. Thus, it presents the whole struggle for Indian independence and its aftermath.

Malgonkar takes an objective view of the turbulent years of struggle and independence and resolutely stands outside the subject to examine these conflicting ideologies. The sharply drawn ideological conflict is projected through Malgonkar's two protagonists, Gian Talwar and Debi-dayal. The novel opens dramatically. Gian Tawar, an educated young man, flings his elegant blazer in a moment of irrational impulse—the blazer which is his most prized possession—into the bone-fire of foreign goods. This happens

when a slim young man who looks like Jawahar Lal Nehru addresses the crowd referring to those who believed in violence as a means to achieve freedom for country and emphasizing that: “Our non-violence is the non-violence of the brave, arising not from cowardice but from courage, demanding greater sacrifice than ordinary fighting men are called upon to make” (Malgonkar 2). Malgonkar’s novels being attuned to the portrayal of historical developments in India at the time of the British and soon after it, some may not take a study of the human relationships in his fictional world as relevant as in Anita Desai’s, for example. This is only a superficial view, for in spite of the temporal and spatial constrictions, his fiction has a universal relevance beneath it as stated above.

The novelist for the progress of the story has employed the device of double hero. Gian Talwar, a young collegiate from a poor peasant family, who has come to Duriabad in West Punjab for college studies, impulsively becomes a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. His college-mate, Debi-dayal, the scion of the rich aristocratic family of Duriabad, has joined the terrorist movement directed against the British regime in India. Once Gian is invited by Debi-dayal to go on a picnic with him so that he could be inducted in the group. Debi’s sister Sundari, Shafi Usman, the leader of the terrorist group and Basu, another member of the terrorist group, are also in the party. Shafi Usman makes fun of Gandhi’s creed of non-violence calling it the philosophy of sheep, a creed for cowards. “They will end up making us a nation of sheep. That is what Gandhi and his followers want. That is exactly what the British want us to be—three hundred million sheep” (57). The most common device which Malgonkar has used is the verbal imagery—mostly similes and metaphors. Even though the novel is full of serious images a few of which could fall into the category of epic similes, there are others which are tampered with comic touches by juxtaposing two objects altogether different in nature. Such images contrast two worlds, two periods, or two objects which are so dissimilar that their juxtaposition provokes laughter Malgonkar picked up some characters for caricature, such as Pandit ji. His aim here appears to be two-fold: to satirize the Brahmins whose rigid interpretation of religious tenets about untouchables and Muslims has been partly responsible for disaffection among the two communities resulting in the partition of the country; and to inject comic touches in the novel.

Moreover, voluntary non-violence can be relevant if and only if, it is followed in the true spirits. Partial or superficial adherence to it does not last long. Thus, Malgonkar attempts a pinpoint in the novel, the inadmissibility of any ideology being valid for the many unpredictable and inexplicable situations of life. It is his conviction that freedom has to be won by sacrifice and by giving blood and not by Gandhi’s Ahimsa. But Gian’s faith in non-violence remains unshaken.

After the college examinations, Gian goes back to his village Konshet. He is fully aware of the fact that his elder brother, Hari, has made great financial sacrifice to send him to college for higher studies and to settle the case of Piploda Land against the Big house. Gian's faith in non-violence is put on trial as soon as he goes back to his village. In his efforts of taking possession of the disputed land, Hari is killed by Vishnu Dutt. Through his killing Malgonkar tries to unfold the idea that land disputes were seldom resolved by decisions of the courts in India. However, after sometime, despite his faith in non-violence, Gian pursues the family feud and commits the vengeful murder of Vishnu Dutt. He confesses his guilt to the police is rewarded life-sentence and is condemned to the Andamans.

Debi-dayal's father Tekchand Kerwad, a rich business magnate of Duriabad, is British in his sympathies. But Debi hates the British and has joined a terrorist group called Ram-Rahim Club. The leader of the group is Shafi Usman, the most wanted man in the state of Punjab. Although there are sharp differences between the Hindus and Muslims, the terrorist movement is still free from this poison of communalism. Under Shafi's able guidance and leadership, the terrorists indulge in acts of sabotage. They burn down government buildings; blow up railway lines and bridges. As a cover up plan they have opened the Human Physical Culture Club, where they hold secret meetings. The C.I.D. keeps a strict watch on the club.

Although, in the beginning, the revolutionaries are not poisoned by the communal finalism but soon, communalism starts raising its ugly head amongst them too. Its seeds are sown when, on getting scent of an impending police raid from C.I.D. inspector Manzoor, Shafi escapes from Duriabad along with other Muslim members. But Debi-dayal and other Hindu members are arrested. Debi-dayal is accused of sabotage of British Military property and is condemned to the Andamans. With Gian and Debi-dayal is yet another lifer, Ramoshi Ghasita, who is going to the penal settlement for the second time for murdering the man who had betrayed him to the police. Malgonkar shows that the three men—Gian, a follower of non-violence, Debi-dayal, a staunch believer of violent means, and Ghasita, a man impartial of both ideologies—are destined to share the same future in the Andamans, owing to their compelling circumstances. Thus, Malgonkar has succeeded in capturing as well as portraying the true spirit of those days—the days of co-existence of conflicting ideologies. Gian is deeply impressed and repeats to himself that “the path of Ahimsa is not for cowards” (3). This is the non-violence of Gandhi, and in order to show his total adherence to it, Gian not only gives up his foreign garments and dressed in Khaddar but also becomes a follower of Gandhi. The next we see him is when he answers the rich young man of his college, Debi-dayal's group. Debi-dayal's friend Singh who turns out, later on, to be Shafi, challenges Gian's belief in non-violence and says that non-violence is the philosophy of the sheep, a creed for cowards.

Gian believed himself to be a true follower of Gandhi's movement on non-violence but the moment he has to confront a situation in his personal life which provokes hatred and anger in him, he realises that gaining an end by peaceful means is not really for people like him. He discovers that ironically enough non-violence is for those who are really strong in spirit, and not for those who use it a shield against decisive action. Gian's first encounter with life is the first of his convictions. Manohar Malgonkar has pictured Gian's psychological realism very well through this episode which is the turning point in Gian's life. He has made it very plain that Gian's belief is not firm. His first encounter with life is fully exploited to examine the creed of non-violence. In these novels violence is certainly not an alternative to non-violence. The value that the novel seeks to affirm is the value of love, which transcends violence and non-violence—the real and the unreal—and bring about freedom and fulfillment to the individual. This is the value that Gian, the emphatic hero and Debi-Dayal, the heroic hero discover in the act of living out of their lives separately, yet strangely involved living.

A Bend in the Ganges (1964) serves as an interesting illustration of his vision of human nature. As regards violence, Malgonkar views it as the essence of human nature. His novels depict outdoor life, action, adventure and violence. A major element that contributes to continuous external action, violence and adventure in his fiction is the theme of revenge. It is a recurrent feature of his novels and it ultimately acquires the status of a major motif in them. It is in *A Bend in the Ganges* that Manohar Malgonkar uses violence, extreme sufferings, action and revenge articulating his vision of human nature and as an integral part of his technique.

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