

Thematic Analysis Of Manohar Malgonkar's A Bend In The Ganges

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Abstract: *Manohar Malgonkar's personal experience of partition is evident in his artful culmination, "A Bend in the Ganges". The religious conflicts during the division of India and Pakistan caused people to endure more than the Second World War. The clash between nonviolence ideology and violent aggression for the similar motivation of freedom is the key feature of the novel. 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 and Pakistan are the bitter truth of independence which Malgonkar has dared to bring out in his novel. Malgonkar had served in the infantry, in counter intelligence, and on the Army's General Staff during World War II, ascending to the position of Lieutenant – Colonel. For him watching his country shredded in to the pieces was an unbearable sight which he has dealt with in the present novel. His majority of the novels deal with the socio-historical milieu of time during the nationalistic movement.*

Keyword: *Partition; nonviolence; violence; independence movement; communal clashes;*

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel opens with the civil disobedience movement. The fine blend of swadeshi movement makes this piece of work as one of the finest example of Partition Literature. A. Padmanabhan has rightly said about Manohar Malgonkar that he is

"Branded as an entertainer and storyteller, the deeper qualities of his fiction have been neglected or unperceived by many. There are only two full-length studies on his fiction by academic critics, namely, G.S. Amur and James Y. Dayanand. N.S. Pradhan takes up only one of the novels – A Bend in the Ganges – for a detailed analysis. H.M. Williams too does not make a sustained study of Malgonkar's fiction (...). The general tendency in the sixties and seventies was to dismiss him in a hasty pell-mell fashion. It is only in the eighties and nineties that he slowly, though partially, emerged from neglect and underrating."

Manohar Malgonkar's novels, "A Bend in the Ganges", which follows the lives of three characters in the rough fallout of partition and "Distant Drum", an eye-opening account of life in the Indian Army during the times of British Raj, adds to

the IWE canon in a fundamental and salutary manner. The image of the time during partition is portrayed by Malgonkar with indisputable reality which comprises of horrendous sights. 300,000 individuals were brutally slaughtered and thousands of women were sexually assaulted, mutilated and kidnapped. Twelve million people went dejected. Malgonkar makes a splendid establishment of the trauma of partition in the novel. The way in which savagery gripped the lives of ordinary humans with viciousness, forms the central subject of the novel. The three main characters are thoughtfully depicted to take the theme of the novel further. There is Gian – supporter of Gandhi, Devi Dayal and his sister Sundari, who is portrayed as a brutal women who holds nothing consecrated.

The setting of the novel is just prior to the partition and the onset of freedom which brings out the stark reality of murder, ramification and anarchy that came along with the dreams of free India. This is one of the most powerful depictions of reality and Rituparna Roy has said,

"This novel is not just one of the most popular novels written on the Partition, but it is also one of the best known texts in the whole canon of Indian English Fiction".

II. THE REVOLUTIONARY CLUB

The main storyline revolves around the three characters and their transformation as a result of partition and the events which followed. The three young men, Gian Talwar, Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman find their lives upside down after learning about the seed of hatred which Britishers had sowed in the heart of Indians before leaving the country. The college student, Gian was an ardent believer of non-violence and wanted to walk on the foot step of Gandhi. Debi and Shafi were members of the terrorist group, "Freedom Fighters" and believed that the country will get independence only through violence. "Hanuman Club" is formed ostensibly for physical culture but the true intention of this club remains terrorist activities. There were many who believed that Gandhian non-violence is not going to lead the nation anywhere and freedom can be only attained by sacrifice and bloodshed. They campaigned for a new religion of brotherhood as they knew that because of religious differences among Indian, the country can never come out from the chains of slavery. The movement of terrorist activities becomes active in Duriabad as a result of the new formation of religion of brotherhood. People from different caste, religion, communities and provinces united to fight against the common cause of liberating the motherland from the clutches of British Rule. The members of Hanuman club are referred as nationalists and Shafi Usman declares himself as the leader of the club and the fellow terrorists. He makes Debi Dayal as his associate when he learns that Debi wants to take revenge from the Britishers as his mother was once attempted to be raped by one drunken British soldier. They create one secret mode of greeting as 'Jairam'! and 'Jairahim'!, to show respect to both the religion equally. They become representatives of those who encourage fanatical solutions for the misery from which India aches.

"They were all fervent patriots, dedicated to overthrow British rule from India. Anyone who represented that rule. British or Indian, was their enemy; anything that represented that rule was their legitimate target."

There was personal motive too behind the curtains of patriotism for Shafi Usmaan and Debi Dayal. Shafi had witnessed his father's death in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 and the humiliation levied by General Dyer's crawling order. He endures the most inhuman atrocities of the English at that time. He has the opinion that

"non-violence is a naked insult to the land of Shivaji and Akbar and Ranjeet".

Similarly when Debi was thirteen years old he had witnessed an attempted rape of his mother by a drunken British soldier. He did everything in his power to save his mother from the disgrace. Burning from that incident he had taken a vow to avenge the humiliation. He went on to learn judo to prepare himself to take brutal revenge. Both of these characters chooses the path of terrorism and completely devoted them to the cause of freedom.

The member of this group involve themselves in several activities such as removing fishplates from the railway tracks, cut telephone wires and blow up Air Force planes with explosives. Over a period of time Shafi becomes the 'most wanted' man in the state and British men even go up to the extent of putting an award for any information related to him

or for bringing him dead or alive. In order to save himself he disguises as a Sikh. As the leader of the group Shafi educates the members about the thoughtless sacrifices and how a war can be only won by being alive and fighting till the last breath. He makes everyone aware about the religious differences as the reason of slavery of India and how Britishers had been taking advantage of these differences by poisoning Hindus and Muslims against each other and Sikhs against both.

III. SWADESHI MOVEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION OF GIAN

Gandhiji and Nehru came to influence people to participate in the Indian independence movement by boycotting British goods. When Gandhiji appeared on the dais, he was spinning cotton wool on a brass spinning wheel and didn't utter a word as it was Monday, the day when Gandhiji is on silence. So, Nehru addressed crowd encouraging them to adopt Swadeshi and throw everything foreign in the fire. People inspired by the speech threw the British Garment in to the fire. Gian Talwar became overwhelmed and threw his imported blazer to burn in to ashes which was his most prized possession and found himself repeating the slogans along with the crowd.

"Mahatma Gandhi ki jai"!

"Victory to non-violence"!

The enthusiasm of nationalistic movement erupts in Gian and he is quite convinced that non-violence is not for the weak and that

"the path of ahimsa is not for cowards".

When Gian arrives at Duraibad in West Punjab for his further education, he makes friend with Debi Dayal. Gian belonged to poor peasant Brahmin family, whereas Debi Dayal was the only son of Dewan Bahadur Tekchand Kerwad who owned Kerwad Construction Company in Duraibad. Shafi Usman led a terrorist group which was joined by Debi Dayal. Gian was invited for a picnic which was arranged by Debi and other revolutionary friends at Birchi bagh. Gian meets Sundari, sister of Debi, Sahfi Usman, leader of the terrorist group who came disguised as a Sikh, and Basu, also a member of the terrorist group in that picnic. Everyone belonged to different family background and different region of India but were bound by their love for the motherland. The clash between the ideologies of Gian and Shafi on non-violence and violence becomes evident during the picnic. Gandhiji represents God in the world of Gian who proudly declares his firm belief on Gandhiji and his principles. Gian has complete trust on non-violent preaching of Gandhiji and that only he would lead India towards the freedom. On the other hand Shafi Usman mocks Gandhiji's creed of non-violence and announces Gandhiji as the enemy of India's national aspirations. He questions Gian that there is no instance in the history where a country has won freedom from foreign rule by the path of non-violence. His conviction is that,

"Freedom has to be won; it has to be won by sacrifice; by giving blood, not by giving up the good things of life and wearing white caps and going to jail. Look at America The United States! They went to war. Turkey! Even our own

Shivaji .Non-violence is the philosophy of sheep, a creed for cowards. It is the greatest danger to this country."

When Debi offers Gian to join their group the later declines this proposition fervently. Gian's faith on non-violence leaves him awestruck when his own brother, Hari was killed by his cousin Vishnudutt and Gian couldn't muster enough courage to fight back and protect his own brother. The dispute was over the land at Pipola which led to the death and left Gian brooding over his faith and sick with guilt filled with trauma

"Coward ... coward! he kept accusing himself, fanning the flame. "Was that why he had embraced the philosophy of non-violence without question from physical cowardice, not from courage? Was his non-violence merely that of the rabbit refusing to confront the hound?"

The impracticality of non-violence in real life becomes evident with this incident. The idealism and philosophy evaporates when it is tested under the heat of life leaving their followers muddled. Gian even contemplates that the whole situation could have been avoided if he had only behaved as a brother rather than an ardent follower of non-violence. His cousin Vishnudutt succeeds in managing the police suppressing the evidence and jeopardizing the justice. Gian frantically consoles himself about his intended recantation of the Gandhian creed of non-violence:

"But that was merely a political expedient a weapon specially forged against the British; how could it serve a philosophy of life itself?"

After this life changing experience Gian vows to take revenge on Vishnudutt with same axe with which Vishnudutt had murdered his brother. Gian realizes that violence cannot be tackled with non-violence and thus he abruptly renounces the Gandhian concept of non-violence. He infringes the principles of non-violence professed by Gandhiji and join hands with violence for the sake of bringing justice to his dead brother. He makes his family's honor and revenge his priority. At last Gian gets life-sentence as a punishment and is convicted to the Andamans.

IV. VIOLENCE AND SUFFERING

The novel begins with Civil Disobedience Movement of the early 1930s and ends with the partition riots in Punjab. From the beginning till the end of the novel one thing which is constant is violence inflicted by the humans on the name of religion and suffering engrossed by the other humans as he result of utter anarchy. It also incorporates a wide variety of source of massacre and tolerance like Swadeshi Movement, the activities of the freedom fighters, and the outbreak of the Second World War, the British retreat from Rangoon, the Bombay dock explosion and the division of India. Mukherjee remarks that "A Bend in the Ganges" is a political novel

"....panoramic in scope and epic in aspiration". (Mukherjee)

The mood of the novel is introduced with an epigraph, a quotation from Gandhiji, in which he has expressed his doubts about his experiment with non-violence:

"This non-violence, there seems to be due mainly to our helplessness. It almost appears as if we are nursing in our

bosoms the desire to take revenge the first time we get the opportunity. Can true, voluntary non-violence come out of this seeming forced non-violence of the weak? It is not a futile experiment I am conducting? What if, when the fury bursts, not a man, woman, or child is safe and every man's hand is raised against his neighbor? (A Bend in the Ganges, Author's note)"

The episode of violence themselves proved the veracity of Mahatma's fear and eventually he himself realized the ineffectiveness of non-violence. The theme of violence and how it affected the lives of common people, including men and women is quite prominent in the novel. Manohar Malgonkar has brilliantly sketched the personality of three central characters. Gian is the follower of Gandhi whereas Devi Dayal is a terrorist and his sister, Sundari is a rancorous woman who deems nothing sacred and is almost in love with her brother. The novel covers the entire chronicle illustrating the movement for independence, the World War and the partition of India, starting from 1930s till the dawn of independence in August 1947. The canvas chosen by Malgonkar is quite vivid where the action encompasses from domestic to national carnage. As Shyam M. Asnani says:

"The novelist's purpose of describing this period seems to be two fold. The first is to introduce the reader, as an objective chronicler, the basic ingredient of the political scene, the violent and the non-violent, the injection of the communal virus, the parting of the ways, the Muslim outcry for division, the Hindu's answer, the Quit India phase and finally the removal of the shackles, climaxed by the creation of two separate states—India and Pakistan. The sole intention of the author is to probe in the ideology of 'Ahimsa', non-violence and truth offered by the Mahatma not only as political expediency, but also as a philosophy and way of life. (Asnani, 43)

The barbarity of civilized community is aptly depicted by Malgonkar by voicing out the screams of the victims, the monstrous cruelty of dead men heaped on each other, innumerable naked and mutilated body of women, struggling and screaming only to die voiceless. Prof Iyengar talks about,

..... the sheer frenzy that possessed people.... Humanity uprooted, humanity mutilated, humanity massacred for the artistic projection of the things that happened in 1947, not even the image of Dante's Inferno can possibly prove adequate. (Iyengar)

V. THEME OF PARTITION

India witnessed demonstrations of viciousness and fierceness during the time of freedom which questioned the civilization of humanity and brought out the demon within them. A Bend in the Ganges, like Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan, takes up the theme of partition and depicts clashing loyalties and different powers at work. The novel

"...delineates with insight, penetration and utter analytical precision the uneasy transformation of colonized country into sovereign state, the difficult passage from the familiar shackles of bondage to the disturbing challenges of freedom". (Roy, 62)

While portraying the awfulness and uselessness of the Partition riots, Manohar Malgonkar analyzes, at incredible length, the legitimacy of philosophies of brutality and peacefulness with regards to the Indian freedom struggle and their importance to life. The novel investigates the Gandhian belief of peacefulness against the background of brutality of the Partition. The exceptional method of the Indian Nationalist Movement is the Gandhian statement of faith of peacefulness. Simultaneously, the part played by violence cannot be ignored. It is as still debatable about the supreme contribution of violence or non-violence to achieve the common goal of independence. A Bend in the Ganges shows that Gandhian way of thinking of non-violence as a political tenet to expel the Empire neglected somewhat as it couldn't accomplish freedom without violence. Consequently it is frequently said that the significant subject of the novel is the dismissal of the Gandhian idea of non-violence. Partition of India is related with violence. The novel seems to blame the lack of vision and understanding of reality on the part of preachers of non-violence, especially Gandhi. K.K.Sharma remarks that,

"A Bend in the Ganges shows Gandhi, the greatest opponent of the Partition, the staunch champion of Hindu-Muslim unity and the true devotee of non-violence, responsible for the Partition and violence in the wake of India's independence". (Sharma)

A Bend in the Ganges vividly elucidates the personal experience of partition which was experienced by Malgonkar. The exceptional presentation of breaking bond between friends and relatives, uprooting of the age long liaisons were shattered beyond repair as a result of partition. The inhuman and harrowing actions were more distressing than the experience of war. The community riots demanding separate nation brought shiver to the spine. The cold illustration by Malgonkar of burning humans alive, raping and mutilated bodies is heart wrenching.

The novel comprises of dramatic richness and conglomeration of plot through the jubilant life in towns of Punjab, the serenity of rolling fields in the hills, the ferocious plight at the cellular jail on the Island of Andamans, the unrelenting life style of Bombay and the catastrophic mob violence at the cessation to provide an epic dimension throughout the narration. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his book, Indian Writing in English, refers to the line, given in The Ramayana, in connection with the title of Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*

"At a bend in the Ganges they paused to take a look at the land they were leaving"

The inchoation of the novel cites the ceremonial burning of the foreign mill-made cloth under the impact of the Swadeshi Movement, foreshadowing the Indian cities burning under the flames of hatred at the end the novel. They say:

"Let them come forward; bring their hats and coats and shirts and ties, to add fuel to this fire.... Boycott British goods! That is the message."

Malgonkar has preferred double hero; Gian Talwar (simple peasant class) and Debi Dayal (high trading class) instead of the usual central protagonist to compare the situation, reaction and consequence in the novel. The crucial discrepancy in the reaction towards the same national events brings out the all-unifying pattern contrast in the novel. Gian

becomes an ardent proponent of Gandhi's creed of non-violence which eventually shatters when tested to the test of time. The picnic in which Gian along with Debi-Dayal and his sister Sundari, Shafi usman, the leader of the terrorist group, are present, portrays the two noticeable methods in Indian freedom struggle; the one which Shafi totally rebuffs and despises and the other violent one which is disagreed by Gandhi and his followers. The feeling of an outsider in Gandhian dress and sacred thread makes Gian befuddled. Debi's belief in violence to chase British from India is portrayed as a noble mean to serve the motherland which led him to a terrorist group "Ram and Rahim Group club". The members of this group although projected as terrorists are devout patriots committed to the cause of freedom. "Jai Ram!" answered by "Jai Rahim!" is kept as a secret code of greeting. The emphasis of the club was on the need and the continuation of the national integrity to run down the British from the Indian soil. The kinship and care which was the backdrop of the novel during pre-partition time is depicted to be crushed under the constraints of overbearing condition.

The Hanuman Club, a façade for the Freedom Fighters, embodies the harmony in the novel, though it is at best an artificial accolade to the fast disappearing secular order. A new religion of brotherhood was proposed by the Hanuman Club in order to tackle the religious adversities. In order to eliminate the religious differences among Indians they thought it is the time to introduce a new religion which could save India from the slavery. Different men from different communities are bound together with the sacred cause of uprooting British Empire from India. To eschew vegetarianism and the taboos of religion they partake in the ceremony of eating beef and pork to overcome any kind of inhibitions. The purpose behind all these actions were getting over their religious fences and becoming brothers in the service of their motherland fighting with all their gut to attain freedom for their country from the tyrannical British regime:

"We are all soldiers, soldiers in the army of liberation. Our aim is to free our motherland India, from the British, and we shall not rest till victory is won."

VI. CONCLUSION

Malgonkar facetiously explicates that even if the terrorist and violence had led the movement still we would have ended up with the same result. As Debi, who was an idealist in the beginning of the novel frets at the end when the two surges of disgraced humankind stream in inverse ways:

"Yet, What was the alternative? Would terrorism have won freedom at a cheaper price and somehow still kept the Hindus and Muslims together? Perhaps not, but at least it would have been an honest sacrifice, honest and manly not something that had sneaked upon them in the garb of non-violence".

The novelist raises the question at the end of the story through Debi that, "Who had won? Gandhi or the British?"

This argument about this issue is highly debatable and has generated a lot of response from critics. Malgonkar has never defended violence as a way of life. He points out the self-consuming nature of violence in the death of Debi Dayal.

Many believe that non-violence as an ideology is not idealistic rather than it is practicality of life. The novel also reveals the dilemmas of innocent victims and the emotional impact of the partition on the psyche of the individuals. Like Khushwant Singh's 'Train to Pakistan', Malgonkar's 'Bend in the Ganges' also asseverate the value of love as transcending all barriers against the background of horrendous communal riots.

Gian attains moral identity through the pure and unselfish love for Sundari. He transforms from a person whose life relied on falsehood, to a person who could acknowledge the truth and practicality of life. This huge transformation was the result of the experience and suffering of life. Debi Dayal also seeks refuge in love the way Gian did. The innocent love of Mumtaz acts as a much needed humanizing force in his life and he finds fulfillment in the overpowering nature of love. Both these characters Gian and Debi seek their salvation in love. The ultimate averment is in

"...the value of love which transcends violence and non-violence the real and the unreal—and bring about freedom and fulfillment to the individuals".

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