

Voices of Protest: A Study of Manohar Malgonkar's Fictional Women

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Abstract

Contemporary fiction aims at bringing the marginalized into the mainstream so as to accord voice to the powerless, the oppressed and the dispossessed. The writers especially the women writers in India seem to grapple with the multifarious aspects and concerns of contemporary women in their writings. They emphatically present detailed accounts of women's lives, experiences, emotions, ideas and pre-occupations. They present women in love, women in adjustment, women in emotional conflict, women in whirlpool of difficulty and ultimately women desiring empowerment to move confidently in the new world as 'a new woman'. However, Manohar Malgonkar has often been considered a male chauvinist writer and it is alleged that his male characters are superior to his women, who are either objects of entertainment, playing subservient role or social rebels. This paper tries to exonerate him of this reductionist view and highlight the aspects, which reveal his sympathy for the woman cause, his adoration for strong and modern women capable of taking challenges at the face, and surviving, that too with confidence.

Men and society have marginalized woman since time immemorial. She has always been a victim of male subordination and oppression and has been considered inferior to him to the extent that becomes clear when we go through what Manu wrote thousands of years back. According to him, “Even though the husband be of bad character and seeks pleasure elsewhere he must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife” (Manusmriti, IX, 14). No wonder Manu was a man like all the men of the society who share Manu’s thoughts. A woman’s life, her identity has always been questionable in society. She has been forced to live as a shadow of one or the other man all through her life; as an obedient daughter of her father; as a caring sister of her brother; as a dutiful wife of her husband and then, as a devoted mother of her son. In every phase of her life, she has been subjugated to man. Even marriage could not get her the happiness and freedom. Ironically, “... it (marriage) fails to assure woman the promised happiness – there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness – but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine” (Beauvoir 478).

However, in modern times, the feminist writers have challenged this view that man and woman are essentially different. They have raised the fundamental question about the social role of woman. “The refusal to be crushed, the attempt to fight and voice protest” (Rai 135) is the core of feminism. Contemporary fiction aims at bringing the marginalized into the mainstream so as to accord voice to the powerless, the oppressed and the dispossessed. The writers especially the women writers in India seem to grapple with the multifarious aspects and concerns of contemporary women in their writings. They emphatically present detailed accounts of women’s lives, experiences, emotions, ideas and pre-occupations. They present women in all hues, one who ultimately emerge as women desiring empowerment to move confidently in the new world as ‘a new woman’. And in my view Manohar Malgonkar, who has often been considered a male chauvinist writer, is no exception.

Malgonkar is a keen observer of manners and moods of men and describes in detail the working of the mind of his characters in his novels and, the characters present an astonishing variety. One of the most striking aspects of his characterization is the importance of masculine characters. It is alleged that his male characters are superior to his women, who are primarily objects of entertainment, playing subservient role. No doubt, he



never chooses women as the central characters of his novel, but whatever small role he gives them, they are in no way mere objects of entertainment. Rather, they are vital to the very theme of the story. Yet, Manohar Malgonkar has often been dubbed as anti-feminist for the kind of depiction of women in his novels. It has been alleged that women are assigned a secondary role in his fiction and that they are either shown as mere pieces of decoration or as social rebels. This paper tries to exonerate him of this reductionist view and highlight the aspects, which reveal his sympathy for the woman cause, his adoration for strong and modern women capable of taking challenges at the face and surviving, that too with confidence.

Malgonkar's portrayal of the inner world of the female psyche happens to be amazingly diverse, ambiguous and multivalent. In matters of love, sexuality and maternity his female characters not only reveal bizarre responses and secret logic but also daring self-assertion. The female consciousness in the Indian scenario also acquaints us in a variety of ways in which women respond to their inner urges and the environment. Malgonkar's women are strong, fully aware of their rights and ready to react when they are denied to them. Although Malgonkar presents them as marginalized, that is to say, his men often try to overpower them, do injustice to them, he endows them with rare strength to come into the limelight and carve out a special niche for them. Sundari of *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), the Maharani, Abhay's mother of *The Princes* (1970), Ruby and Jean of *Combat of Shadows* (1962), and Kashi of *The Devil's Wind* (1972) – all are the perfect examples of strong-willed and enlightened women cable of slapping the society at the face when it denied them the right to live happily.

In *A Bend in the Ganges*, Malgonkar has portrayed Sundari, the sister of Debi Dayal as an embodiment of love and grace. Like the touchstone that transforms iron to gold, she has the power to transform Gian, the protagonist, completely and help him emerge a real hero, so much so that he is able to rise above self, above falsehood and deceptions. As we navigate through the pages of the novel, we find her caught in an inner turmoil trying to tear her apart and killing the woman in her. Though herself a love incarnate, she does not get true love from her husband and is cheated by him. Her marriage to Gopal is merely conventional and no love is lost between them, and hence, there is emptiness in her life.

Sundari could not help being conscious of the artificiality that had crept between them. She knew now that he did not love her, had never been in love with her...She had come to accept that a Hindu wife must subordinate herself for the sake of convention.... (*A Bend in the Ganges* 314 - 315).

His faithlessness to her kills the finer feeling in her. She is totally shattered at seeing her husband making love to another woman. "For days, she had been nervous and irritable ... resenting what she could see was a growing intimacy between her husband and Malini" (*A Bend in the Ganges* 316). But she is not ready to play a second fiddle to him. She retaliates and pays him back in the same coin. She so manages that Gopal sees her lying on the beach embraced in Gian's arms, semi naked, something that she had seen Gopal doing with the other woman.

He (Gopal) was aware, even as he applied his eye to the telescope that he was looking at exactly what he was meant to see ... Sundari and a man lay in the thickest of reeds ... so this was her way of getting her own back, delivering the death-blow to their marriage....(*A Bend in the Ganges* 321).

This way she kills the man, the husband in Gopal, just as he had killed the woman in her. Malgonkar's Sundari is neither a coward nor a show piece nor a social rebel. On the contrary, she is a strong woman with self respect who is ready to retaliate when taken for a ride.

Sundari finds true love in Gian, and this new relationship opens a new vista. All the ingredients of a tempestuous exciting love affair conducting in secrete are there, but to Gian the happiness, this bond brings, is deeply flawed by his sense of guilt. The unpardonable crime of having betrayed Sundari's brother Debidayal lies like a heavy shadow between them. A new conflict is born within him. He wants to tell her everything about his relationship with Debidayal before confessing his love to her, but she is not prepared to listen to him. The thought that his romance is built on the foundation of deceit torments him. But to Gian now life means nothing without Sundari. She has given meaning to his life and he wants her to share his life openly. He tells her that love is something special to him. If Sundari rejects his suggestions, he will go back to Andamans and live lonely life there. Malgonkar here shows Gian's weakness but at the same time he shows us

how Gian is prepared to sacrifice everything as Sundari's love has made him strong. This is the turning point in Gian's life. He gives up deceit and becomes truthful. However, still he is not courageous enough to tell Sundari everything that happened in the Andamans between him and her brother. Obviously, Gian's need for Sundari, to share his life with her, is too great to take this last step towards complete truthfulness. Gian's transformation because of Sundari's love and truthfulness bears a testimony to the inner strength of Sundari. Not only Gian, Debidayal is also fulfilled through the pure love of Mumtaz. His compassion for Mumtaz transforms him and compels him to review the philosophy of his life.

The Maharani of *The Princess*, Prince Abhays mother is another sufferer in this male-dominated society where the subject of love has a totally different connotation. The maharaja Hiroji considers love as a duty or social obligation. His slack views on marriage are:

A marriage is a sacred thing. It is not a private, purely personal matter at all, but an affair of the state, as it were. Even the Political Department has an interest. There is a duty, an obligation, to marry someone suitable, someone whom the people will one day have to accept as their Maharani (*The Princess* 166).

These words, from the mouth of the Maharaja who ill-treats his wife as an untouchable, have a signal of pretension. He regards her as a woman with a white foot, bringing bad luck wherever she went. The queen, being very miserable, speaks of her marriage as being tied to a pair of feet. Even her son, the prince pities her in the beginning, when she narrates to him the story of her being kicked by her husband on the very first night of their marriage. She is discarded and left alone like a leper, so much so that she has to suppress her instinct to live the life of a normal woman. This was the plight of the maharani who was ill treated all through her life and was denied the very right to live life happily to the extent that hearing of her predicament, the prince advises her to break away before it is too late:

“Maji”, I said. “Go away from here. Go somewhere and live life of your own. You have your own money, your own houses. You can’t go on living here, the way you are living; shut away forgotten. I have always pitied you, felt for you.” (*The Princes* 164)

And ultimately, Malgonkar infuses in her so much strength and courage to live the way she wants to and determines to break away the chains of marriage and live a full life. However, when she finally decides to go, the same son on becoming a man fails to appreciate the spirit of her action. He insults her very cruelly on her decision, but the mother is determined to break away the chains of marriage and live life fully. She prefers to be a woman of the streets than to be a Maharani in darkness. She wants to be a complete woman who is loved by her husband. Thus, her confrontation with Abhay proves that, despite the apparent differences in attitude, he was basically just like his father; he has always been his (the Maharaja’s) boy. Here again, Malgonkar highlights the disparity in men’s behavior by showing that her son, who initially sympathized with her, fails to appreciate the spirit of her action.

Thus, Malgonkar has very artistically shown Abhay in the very vortex of a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. His love for his mother clashes with his upbringing as an Indian male of the princely class to whom the women of his family are just sheltered chaste dolls, waiting in the wings, may be forever, to be called by their men. They are supposed to be seen only by their men, devoted to their husbands to the extent that they may not even lift their eyes to other men. The male in Abhay demands from his mother this unquestioning acceptance of her utterly degrading position, while all the time he is painfully aware of the great wrong done to her by his father. The nightmare of his childhood comes true when his mother tells him of her resolve to leave the palace. The turmoil in his mind – the war between his rational self and his emotional self – is very aesthetically depicted by the author.

Malgonkar has clearly shown how a modern man feels, first as a man, an Indian, who cannot accept his mother’s decision to live a life of her own, and as an individual, who believes in a woman’s right to live and to be loved. This agonizing conflict purges his mind fully and he comes to appreciate and love his own wife Kamala, whom he had married simply to please his father. Abhay’s conflict goes through a phase of intense

unhappiness, of blind anger and then of mature sympathy leading on to peace and understanding. Abhay emerges from this experience, a better individual, a man who can set his own interests aside to feel the agony of another. Thus, what shocks Abhay is Maharani's betrayal of princely tradition. The critics could point out that "this, after Abhay's affair with Minnie, and after advice to his mother to lead her own life!" But that only reflects how deeply rooted is in Abhay, his princely tradition and how superficial, the impact of modern influences.

In *Combat of Shadows*, the saga of clash of cultures and races, Malgonkar shows the moral degradation of Henry Winton, the hero by involving him in a kind of cultural conflict - his relationship with Ruby Miranda, the Anglo-Indian school-teacher who becomes his mistress. Ruby is highly ambitious and is attracted to Henry and hopes to be his wife one day. She is driven by a dream of marrying an English man and be considered English. Her relation with Henry is to her a passport to her dream. But Henry has other ideas. After a fleeting affair with her, he discards her away like an old piece of furniture and marries an all-white English woman from England. Malgonkar clearly demonstrates that though Henry's involvement with Ruby is very deep, he could not cross the thin line that separates the English men from the Anglo-Indian women. He is self-centered and thinks only of his own position and race, and never has any consideration for Ruby's feelings. Henry treats Ruby merely as an object of pleasure and wants to be cautious about 'the thin line that separates fun from serious involvement' and thus uses Ruby only for fun. Henry loves her only to seek animal pleasure. Ruby loves him to be his wife and get the rightful status. She craves to lift their relationship from 'a hole-and-corner affair of passion to the sphere of love' but in vain. She even tells Henry about her former love for Eddie. Thus, Malgonkar has contrasted Ruby's frankness to guileful nature of Henry. Having the inclination that his involvement with Ruby might mar his career, he goes on leave to sever his relations with her. It is this fear that prompts him to marry Jean in England. Ruby's hopes are shattered when Henry brings Jean to India as his wife. However, on the face of it, she shows herself to be a strong woman, not clinging to him for he has undone her.

While it is true that Ruby's interest in Henry is out of love and is, in a different way, equally selfish, yet she is prepared to give up her real love for Eddie Trevor in order to marry Henry. On the other hand, in his obsession with the colour, Henry does not realize

at this juncture, that his attraction for Ruby has developed into love. It is only much later that Henry comes to understand the longing he feels for Ruby- too late he realizes that:

His chief reason for wanting to go on leave was to get away from Ruby Miranda ... he no longer trusted himself not to cross what sudden had referred to as the thin line that separated fun from serious involvement, he was deliberately preventing himself from falling in love with Ruby.
(*Combat of Shadows* 279)

He fights against the desire to marry her, to have children by her and be a very happy man. His obsession with all white women, with his being British defeats him, corrupts him and ultimately destroys him both morally and physically. Ruby, on the other hand, refuses to take the insult to her womanhood lying down. Malgonkar has clearly depicted how Ruby strives to be considered suitable to become Henry's wife. Henry is surprised and shocked when he knows of Ruby's violent reaction to his marriage to Jean. He had never expected such a strong reaction from Ruby. In Ruby, Henry confronts the most cherished dream of an Anglo-Indian woman, face to face.

Ruby's long cherished dream was shattered to pieces when Henry marries Jean, an English woman. Not only this, he insults her by calling her 'chi-chi street walker' and 'half-caste slut.' She fails to take this humiliation as Henry steps on her wound and fiercely swears to kill him.

"I will kill you for this, Henry Winton", she said very coldly, her face looking more like a bloodless paper-mache mask than ever. "No matter how long it takes, I shall kill you for what you have said." (*Combat of Shadows* 153)

Thus, Ruby tries steadfastly to be avenged on Henry Winton for his ruthless betrayal and duplicity. And, Ruby proves her words true. As a helpless poor woman suddenly abandoned by Henry, she learns to be schematic in order to pay him in the same coin. She would not forgive the soulless cheat who has ruined her life and shattered her dream. She leads Henry to death in the contrived flames at the game cottage where Henry hoped to exploit her once again.

Like Ruby, Jean too is a woman with self-respect and loves integrity in a man which is all lacking in her husband Henry. So, her love for him fails to last long. She resents Henry's duplicity and cunningness in concealing his past relations with Ruby. When Henry objects to her intimacy with Eddie Trevor, she rejects his insinuations and taunts him boldly for his earlier flirtations with Ruby. She abhors his artificial and superficial love and says:

You have never given me your whole-hearted love, Henry, although you have demanded it from me. You have always held back – and that, a woman can never forgive. (*Combat of Shadows* 200)

She refuses to be taken for granted by Henry and accepts Eddie as her lover to spite the cowardice in Henry. "In her transgression she has expressed her protest without compromise" (Rajagopalachari 41). She clearly shows to Henry that Eddie has replaced him in her affections. Eddie's cold-blooded murder further reveals to her the impossibility of life with Henry and she decides to leave Henry forever and thus vindicates her faith in integrity. Thus, Jean and Ruby emerge finally as women of independent and strong character. They defy falsity in all its manifestations. They refuse to be sold to a life of comfort at the expense of self-respect and independence. Thus, Malgonkar has portrayed both of them as very strong characters having natural human emotions.

Another woman who was born to suffer was Kashi, the wife of Nana Saheb in *The Devil's Wind*. Kashi who was rightfully wedded wife of Nana Saheb had a different problem. Nana Saheb was a cursed man. He has been told that if his marriage was consummated, the wife was sure to die. The curse is a very peculiar one, because his mistress could bear his children but his wife could die for the prophecy is that. The first two women Nana Saheb married did not long survive. Kashi was the third wife and she survived because her marriage was never consummated. Nana Saheb had actually no wish to marry the third time since he felt that he would be the cause of her death, but he had to succumb to family pressure. Kashi was ten years old when she was brought to marry Nana Saheb and because of the curse she remained a virgin till she parted from Nana Saheb in Nepal. During ceremonies and festivals Kashi and Nana Saheb sat side by side as man and wife and offered prayers together but that was as far as their relationship went. She lived in a distant wing of Wada, which Nana Saheb seldom visited. Nana Saheb admitted that he

did not think of her as a wife and did not do anything for her, in fact, whatever he did was to save her from the curse. What they shared was almost a master and a slave relationship. Nana Saheb could understand the plight of Kashi and did pity her, but he unquestioningly believes that superstitious curse, and by not sleeping with her, he was saving her from death. But he never realized that he was killing the women in her.

Kashi was brought up by Raja Rao to rule up and command, to ride and shoot, to play the sitar and sing. She could talk with authority on any subject that a cultivated person might be interested in. Proud, spirited woman Kashi wants to be a mother and if she can become a mother in his own right, she would adopt a child to become a mother. She is not merely a decorative piece but has a personality of her own - which emerges more strongly in later events. The true woman in Kashi appears when Nana Saheb seeks shelter in Nepal. Possibly Nana Saheb got shelter because Jung Bahadur was interested in Kashi, though, of course, Nana Saheb was not prepared to sell Kashi and get shelter. Like a true husband, he wants to protect her and is angry at the thought of leaving Kashi with Jung Bahadur. He is angry with Kashi who accepts the plan. He even insults her but she is firm and regal in her decision to remain behind, with Jung Bahadur when her husband leaves for the Terai.

Because this is the best thing that could have happened – to you, to me, to all of us.... The British will kill you, and here is your only chance. How long are you going to run like a rabbit? And ... I too will get what I want ... I want to be a woman, not merely a repressed freak. I want to live, to be a mother ... I am doing this as much for you as for myself (*The Devil's Wind* 259).

Malgonkar's sympathy was clearly with this surpassingly desirable woman who has at last found happiness. She is a woman not a goddess, to be above human desires. She feels that by accepting Jung Bahadur she cannot only fulfill her womanly urges but also help her husband. She considers this to be the best way out for both of them. Here is the conflict of a woman, trying to assert herself, seeking the fulfillment of her individuality; her rightful place in life itself and the fulfillment of her desires and aspirations. She wants to be a whole woman and not merely a decorative piece of furniture. Malgonkar has portrayed the conflict in the Indian woman's life and we find that his sympathies are clearly with the woman who suffers the agonies of frustrations and struggles to come into her own at the cost of everything else in her life. Malgonkar has portrayed the Indian husband enraged at

the idea of his wife being willing to live with another man, his ego is hurt, he is worried about what the society would say and yet finally Nana Saheb accepts the situation. His reason tells him that what Kashi has done is the only logical outcome. He releases her from the cruel bondage of the curse. Kashi achieves a two-fold purpose, hence. She is able to save her husband's life as well as fulfill her womanly desire of being loved. She is in no way a weakling, but a strong-willed lady capable of taking strong decisions.

Thus, there is no denying the fact that, although, Malgonkar has never chosen women as the central characters of his novel, but whatever role they play, they are in no way mere objects of entertainment or social rebels. Rather, they are vital to the very theme of the story. They have the courage to stand up against oppression and deceit and voice their feelings of protest against injustice. His fictional women indeed are strong and capable of taking challenges at the face and surviving, that too with confidence. Despite the fact that they are like any other women in love, women in adjustment, women in emotional conflict, women in whirlpool of difficulty, they are all ultimately women desiring fulfillment, self-respect, happiness and also empowerment to move confidently as 'a new woman'.

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