
Representation of Women Characters in the Selected Novels of Manohar Malgonkar

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of women characters in the selected novels of Manohar Malgonkar. Manohar Malgonkar is known for his historical realism, political concerns and masculine narrative frameworks. In addition to the above themes, his novels offer significant insights into the portrayal of women in a traditionally patriarchal Indian society. Identity politics plays a significant role, as exemplified by Ruby Miranda, Jean Walters and Gauri. These characters illustrate gendered colonial experience and power struggle in *Combat of Shadows*. Feminine characters such as Maharani and Kamala showcase gendered oppression and resilience in the *Princes*. Women characters like Sundari, Malini and Debi's mother challenge passive roles, asserting autonomy in *A Bend in the Ganges*. *The Devil's Wind* depicts the women characters such as Kashi, Champa, Girija and Eliza, concentrating on the revolt that extended beyond the battlefield.

Malgonkar represents women who adapt to conventional roles of wifhood, motherhood and domestic responsibility. However, he depicts women who exhibit independence, inner conflict and subtle confrontation against oppressive norms. Those characters function as moral anchors, as silent sufferers, or as observers of male-dominated power structures. Through a close reading of selected novels, the study highlights themes such as female marginalisation, identity, emotional endurance and limited agency. The paper highlights that women characters, though not central to Malgonkar's narratives, play a crucial role in exposing the historical, psychological, and ethical dimensions of society through their portrayal in his novels.

Keywords: Historical realism, gender politics, female marginalisation, identity, psychological narrative

Introduction

Manohar Malgonkar is one of the exponents of historical fiction in Indian Writing in English, having written historical novels that engage with political themes. He describes the upper classes, including army officers, rulers, businessmen, politicians, and princes. His settled view of life, his ignorance of ordinary people and their actual issues, and the diverse female characters in his works.

Women are viewed as individuals in themselves, mothers, wives, sisters or daughters as represented in the Indian Writing in English, which is characterised by a pursuit of selfhood. The life of most Indian women is influenced by authoritarian values. The relationship between husband and wife is undergoing transformation, and women are pursuing their individuality, thereby posing numerous strains on the marriage. She revolts against the concept of a wife being used, owned and used as an ornamental object. Dayananda remarks:

Malgonkar did not choose to endow his women with flesh and blood, with complex and ambiguous natures, but rather emphasised one aspect of character while leaving out others of equal or greater importance. This is what makes his feminine characters appear to be stereotypes. (61)

Malgonkar's novels portray the tradition and customs of India, the East-West encounter, the fall of princely India, the freedom struggle, the sepoy mutiny, women and the historical aspects of India. He applied various narrative methods to narrative stories that put an external action on focus, as well as delving into introspection. He critiques the characters and events in a detached manner, which is the aspect of a historian. Some of the dissenters are depicted in novels, but they are not pleased with their uprising. Manohar Malgonkar does not depict the state of women; he creates an impressive portrait of women who are restless and bound by traditions that have endured for centuries. He explains that women are represented as examples of cultural values within a society with boundaries. His description is shallow and one-dimensional. His narratives highlight male supremacy, but the female characters also exhibit traits such as independence and rebellion. His depiction of women characters, from oppressed to empowered.

Combat of Shadows explores issues of women's empowerment and presents an unflattering portrait of colonial masculinity through the character of Henry Winton. It is the story of a patriarchal society where British men, such as Henry Winton, are in control, especially over women. Indian and Anglo-Indian women are oppressed, marginalized and objectified. The empowerment of women is represented by Ruby Miranda's altered voice in *Combat of Shadows*, which roars out in rebellion. Ruby Miranda, an Anglo-Indian, is an example of the ambivalent stand of women between two cultures. The colonial hierarchy influenced her aims and desires. She wants to get married to a white man, Henry Winton, in order to increase her social status in the colonial society. She is conflicted on the balance between the racial tension between the Indians and the British, and she does not like the white men she seeks to impress. The sense of rootlessness and the identity crisis were brought about by her intricate attitude towards the white race, brought about by discrimination. Despite all the foregoing, Ruby is resilient and self-assertive. She coldly declares, "I will kill you for this, Henry Winton," she said very coldly, her face looking more like a bloodless papier-mache mask than ever. "No matter how long it takes, I shall kill you for what you have done and what you have said." (Malgonkar, *Combat of Shadows* 163-164). Her narrative reveals the silent disappointment of Anglo-Indian women as they observe the corruption of men's morals in the colonial setting.

Jean Walters, the British wife of Henry Winton, is an epitome of colonial femininity. She is well placed in society but, at heart, remains emotionally reserved, as is typical of a European who has endured the constraints of isolation and societal pressure. Her matrimony, which is based on the social norms, turns out to be disillusioning as she observes the corruption and the wants of Henry. She dislikes and abandons him and leaves the colonial masculinity and patriarchal confines.

Malgonkar brings out the women characters of all classes in society and their sensibilities. Gauri is a coolie female in a tea estate, which is the image of the helplessness and oppression of Indian women in colonial patriarchy. Her existence is slavery, abuse and isolation in a small community. She confronts the predatory stare of Henry Winton and his immoral acts, exposing the savage ability that enables colonial men to use local women without much repercussion. Her caste, gender and the colonial labour system are all factors that led her to be prone to abuse. As Rao observes, “The very name Gowri is symbolical of feminine strength and power in Hindu mythology, and it seems that the novelists choose this name with a purpose. Both Gowri and Ruby play a very important role in the destruction of Henry” (37).

Combat of Shadows criticises the colonial male gaze in its objectification of women as lusts or goods. It shows the identity crisis women face in society. The sense of rootlessness, absence of belonging, and alienation were caused by their rejection by the white ruling majority and, at the same time, their desire to be recognised by the British.

In *The Princes*, Malgonkar discusses the lives of princes in India. It is the biographical portrait of an Indian prince. It is an epic and an autobiography. Malgonkar also has first-hand knowledge of the princes, as he is the grandson of the Prime Minister of a popular Indian state. Malgonkar captured the princely manners within, with all their weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, in the authenticity of his novels.

The Maharani in *The Princes* is introduced as follows: the traditional role of the wife and the mother who spends her time in prayer. She is a mere status symbol to Abhay, to be loved and worshipped as a mother goddess, and to Hiroji, her husband, the Maharaja of Begwad, as a mere status symbol. At the start of the novel, it seems that Abhayraj, the main character, can become an agent of change, but this proves false, as he cannot break the ties to old values and traditions. As a boy, Abhay does not like his father’s attitude because of his inflexibility and indifference, especially toward his mother, the queen (Maharani). It is to this heinous injustice that the queen is neglected and is sent into the seclusion of another palace with no contact with the Maharaja. Maharaja also considers his wife an untouchable and is a pretentious person. The prince even sympathises with her towards the start when she tells him the tale of how she was kicked by her husband. In the words of Tripathi:

The character of Maharani is a remarkable achievement of the author. Maharani also symbolises the changing conditions and attitude of women in the royal families. Hiroji Prince Abhay’s father and the Maharaja treat his mother like a non-living thing. Maharaja’s infidelity towards the Maharani, and infatuation for his concubines embitters Abhay and

overshadows all of his father's good qualities in his eyes. Despite this negligent attitude of their husbands, the royal women were also forced to lead a life of social outcast. (170)

Maharani is the opposite of her husband, Hiroji, who is unable to accept new changes in life and prefers to die. Maharani, on the other hand, is the new Indian woman in many ways. The woman on her path struggles to secure her place in life. She adores life, and she throws away the old norm. Maharani's character is presented as a strong-willed woman longing to experience real womanhood, not just to rebel against convention but also to refuse to abide injustice in the name of duty and sacrifice. She asserts, "I may be a bitch, but I am no longer a shameless woman of the streets. I was one, all these years, when I lived with a man in sin. But remember, I had been abandoned by my husband-I was a discarded woman. Her eyes were hard, her voice dry, her words like the pricks of a scalpel" (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 356).

immediately upon becoming an adult. Tradition stipulates that, as an heir apparent, he must be wedded to a wife. Abhay is married to Kamala, and he leads a happy life. Malgonkar has brought to the fore the broader scope of life and, within it, the state of the Indian woman as represented by the Maharani. Malgonkar, portrayed in the novel as a woman, is not traditional, as she sheds her shackles of oppression, even when it causes her great pain. The Maharani's situation makes him feel his own inferiority, and this later awakens him to love his wife, Kamala, thus setting right what his father had done to his mother. Abhay says, "'I am telling you that I love you,' I told her, and I felt wholly sincere as I said it." (Malgonkar, *The Princes* 352). Malgonkar attracts his characters through perfect lines. This is the stage of emotional maturity. It is Zarina who assists him in the ownership of himself, and the end result is that it is the love of Kamala, which was stable and mature, that sees him become the man he truly is, a man of the world.

Sundari, the character in *A Bend in the Ganges*, is a portrait of a woman from high society in Indian society. Sundari is the daughter of the Dewan Bahadur Tekchand Kerwad, the owner of Kerwad Construction Company and Kerwad Housing Development. Tekchand and his wife, Radha, discuss the suitability of a bridegroom for Sundari, and they believe that Sundari will easily integrate into Gopal's westernised life. "Sundari felt miserable. She herself was going on her honeymoon; her brother was on his way to the Andamans. She had to remind herself that this was a time for joy and excitement, but it was difficult to drag her thoughts away from Debi (her brother)" (Malgonkar, *A Bend in the Ganges* 149).

The husband of Sundari, Gopal Chandidhar, belongs to a slightly different world. Sundari and Gopal are stuck in a wrong marriage. They clash off and on. Sundari never agrees with his attitude toward marriage as a convention that does not necessarily imply a bond of mutual love. She fails to find love in her life with Gopal and therefore finds it in Gian, whom she knows loves her, but even with Gian, she questions whether he loves her the right way. Miglani states:

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 as a real hero, so much so that he is able to rise above self, above falsehood and deceit. (225)

Malgonkar never shows the eternal triangle of love in which a woman must decide between her husband and her lover. This is of far more importance. She rejects the emptiness of a standard union in a marriage as well as love founded on lying. Sundari does not need to seek meaning in a place that has none. She longs for the justification of the role of a wife in the life of a Gopal rather than the position of a wife without love and companionship.

Kashi, a rightfully wedded wife of Nanasaheb in *The Devil's Wind*, does not have the same issue. Nanasaheb was a cursed man. He has heard that in case his marriage was consummated, death was certain to his wife. It is a very strange curse, as his mistresses had the power of bearing him children, and his wife would die. The two original wives that Nanasaheb married did not live long before they passed away. The third wife was called Kashi, and she had survived because her marriage to her husband was never consummated. Nanasaheb also gives the admission that he never thought of her as a wife and never bothered himself doing anything for her; in fact, what they had was more like a master and slave relation. Kashi was an ideal slave, hard-working, diligent and devoted. The real woman in Kashi comes out as Nanasaheb runs to Nepal as a refugee. Shelter was provided to Nanasaheb because Jung Bahadur was interested in Kashi. Being a real husband, he wants to defend her and is furious with Kashi, who agrees to the schemes. "By rejecting me as your wife, you saved my life. God has given it to me to do you the same service, by rejecting you as my husband" (Malgonkar, *The Devil's Wind* 286). He even abuses her, but she remains steadfast and royal in her resolve to stay with Jung Bahadur when her husband goes away to the Terai. Kashi believes that she can satisfy her womanly desires by accepting Jung Bahadur and even supporting her husband. She feels it is the most suitable outlet for both of them. Mohan Jha argues, "Ruby Miranda or Jean Walters in relation to Henry Winton, the Maharani or Minnie Bradley in relation to the Maharaja or Abhayraj or both, Sundari in relation to Gian Talwar or Debi-dayal, Kashi and Eliza Wheeler in relation to Nana Saheb" (21).

Conclusion

Manohar Malgonkar is a masculine author. Women in his novels get a secondary role. They are not depicted as fully as possible. Love is in conflict with the bondage of traditions. The Maharani and Sundari, Ruby Miranda and Kashi are miserable to the point that they fight severely to achieve their status in life. Malgonkar has addressed the contemporary woman seeking self-fulfilment in his novels.

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