



ISSN Print: 2664-8679
ISSN Online: 2664-8687
Impact Factor: RJIF 8
IJSJH 2023; 5(1): 66-68
www.sociologyjournal.net
Received: 05-05-2023
Accepted: 09-06-2023

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Element of Revenge and Violence in Manohar Malgonkar's A Bend in the Ganges

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648679.2023.v5.i1a.65>

Abstract

The fiction of Manohar Malgonkar is marked by popular appeal and literary excellence. His novel *A Bend in the Ganges* published in 1964 is Malgonkar's fourth novel. The world of Manohar Malgonkar's novels is full of violence and revenge that runs through all his novels. The novel under study delves into the complexities of human nature and societal dynamics amidst a backdrop of political upheaval and personal vendettas. Apart from probing into the ideology of non-violence and the grim reality of violence, the novelist has thrown ample light on some of the basic ingredients of the Indian political scene during independence struggle, which was climaxed by the partition tragedy. In the present paper a modest attempt has been made to understand the novel and interpret the various manifestations of Malgonkar's concept of violence and revenge including physical, mental, and societal aspects.

Keywords: Partition, violence, revenge, non-violence, independence

Introduction

Manohar Malgonkar is one of the best-known Anglo-Indian authors writing about the post-independence period. He is well known for handling bold and challenging themes in his fiction. The story of the novel *A Bend in the Ganges* is woven in the backdrop of India's struggle for independence and the tragedy of partition riots. The novel deals with the novelist's strategy to discredit non-violence and to demonstrate its ineffectiveness in the context of life situation. The novelist refuses the philosophy of non-violence. In fact, Malgonkar says in his preface to the novel:

"Only the violence in the story happens to be true. It came in the wake of freedom to become a part of India's history. What was achieved through nonviolence, brought with it one of the bloodiest upheavals of History: twelve million people had to flee, leaving their home; nearly half million were killed; over hundred thousand women, young and old, were abducted, raped, mutilated." (1) (ABIG, pg.6)

A Bend in the Ganges deals with violence and communal disharmony within its aesthetic perspective. Manohar Malgonkar views it within a traditional and patriarchal set of fixities and finalities. The violence persists throughout the novel. Violence and revenge characterize the novel. Apart from probing into the ideology of non-violence and the grim reality of violence, the novelist delves deep into the Indian political scene during freedom struggle which was climaxed by the creation of two separate nations and the partition holocaust. The novel opens with Gandhi's bonfire of the British clothes and ends with partition violence and bloodshed. That marked the sunrise of our freedom. Gian Talwar a young boy, from a poor peasant family, who has come to Duriabad in the west Punjab for college studies becomes a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and embraces his creed of non-violence: "Our weapons are truth and non-violence. Our war shall be fought only by peaceful means. Gandhi ji has shown us the path." *A Bend in the Ganges* Malgonkar's fourth novel which: raises the fundamental issue of the meaning of violence and non-violence." (p.8)

It explores the interrelated destinies of Gian Talwar, a college student and Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman who are wedded to violence as terrorist working for the overthrow of the British Raj. The former courting disillusionment and the latter becoming an ardent communalist. Gian Talwar becomes a follower of Gandhi, but subsequently realizes that his belief in non-violence is not practical in real life. Sundari, Debi-Dayal's sister, who breaks

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her own marriage for emotional revenge, against the epic background of the struggle for independence. The climax of the novel is "... the stupefying bloodshed and violence that erupted from the dream of independence" (2) and which consumes Debi Dayal, Shafi Usman and many others. Only Gian Talwar and Sundari are left with a faint promise of future. A Bend in the Ganges is intended as an 'anatomy of Ahimsa'. Malgonkar says, "In Bend in the Ganges, I tried to show how non-violence does not suit a large country like ours." (3)

Gandhi's creed of *Ahimsa* is discredited by the reality of violence. The story of A Bend in the Ganges is rooted in revenge and counter revenge. Each episode of the novel is structured on the revenge theme. In the novel which is a story of struggle for independence and followed by tragedy of partition contains much violence and rightly begins with the burning of British garments. Gian Talwar joins the group of followers of Mahatma Gandhi. The creed of non-violence strikes a sympathetic chord in his young heart. The revenge drama properly begins with his involvement in the family feud at Konshet between his family known as 'the Little House' and 'the Big House'. In the dispute over Piploda land Hari, his elder brother, is killed by his uncle Vishnu Dutt. For a while he behaves like a true follower of Mahatma Gandhi but his keen desire for revenge overcomes his principles. It almost possesses him; he spends several days in searching the axe with which Hari was killed and finally kills Vishnu Dutt with it:

'I have just killed Vishnu Dutt,' Gian told him. 'Killed him with the same axe with which he murdered my brother! And then the blood that was spattered on his shirt in a diagonal streak. (p. 67)

Revenge alone satisfies Gian Talwar, even as it lands him in jail. The novel from here onwards shifts its focus from Gian, who had adopted non-violence but is forced to choose violence, to Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman, who are angry young men and are wedded to violence. Both Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman have become terrorists largely for personal reasons. As G.S. Amur has noted:

"Debi like Shafi and other terrorists, has a personal motivation in becoming a revolutionary. It is the traumatic experience of his adolescence, the site of a drunken Scottish soldier, attempting to rape his mother, which turns him into a God of vengeance." (4)

Debi chooses the path of violence to avenge himself on the British and he joins the terrorist group headed by Shafi Usman. When Shafi and Debi burn the military plane, this act for Debi Dayal is one of Self fulfilment. Later, Shafi Usman's betrayal of Debi and other terrorists leads them to imprisonment, giving rise to another occasion of yet another kind of revenge for Debi Dayal. Gian Talwar, Debi Dayal and Ramoshi Ghasita have been given life imprisonment for different reasons: murder for defending family honor, revolutionary activities and meeting the demands of tribal justice – but the underlying motive is the motive of revenge. Then Sundari, soon after her marriage to Gopal Chandidar, sees through a telescope that her husband is flirting with Malini. She feels slighted and plans a very sophisticated kind of revenge. She employs the same telescope that revealed her husband's infidelity to her, six years later to humiliate him: "Ever since I have been waiting to avenge myself. Today I have succeeded.

I arranged he should take a good look at us, you and me, while we were here, making love, or giving the impression

of it, naked. If you hadn't been here, anyone else would have done...." (ABIG, p.330)

Thus, Sundari's sophisticated mode of revenge is matched with Debi Dayal's way of taking revenge on Shafi Usman. Devi purchases Mumtaz, a favorite courtesan of Shafi Usman at a brothel in Lahore, to hurt him emotionally. Like Sundari, Debi Dayal chooses emotional revenge. The taking away of Mumtaz by Debi Dayal enrages Shafi and he feels hurt and humiliated, he sneaks out of the back door and throws acid bulbs at Mumtaz. Each major episode focuses on revenge of one or the other i.e. economic, physical, political, communal, and emotional revenge. Through the motif of revenge Malgonkar wants to present the whole complex spectrum of human psychology underlying the passion for revenge – the passion which turned gods into furies. This revenge motif gives a unity of focus to the novel which it would otherwise have lacked.

The action of A Bend in the Ganges which moves from personal vendetta to national bloodshed illustrates the unreality of non-violence and the reality of violence, reaching its climax in the partition holocaust. After first showing Gian Talwar with the Gandhi crowd, the novelist puts him among terrorists like Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman who make fun of his creed of non-violence. The words of Shafi Usman have a prophetic ring about them, specially, in view of what happens in the last bitter part of the novel:

"It has happened nowhere; it can't happen here! Gandhi, by weakening the spirit of men, making us all into sheep and cattle, will only multiply the sacrifice. A million shall die, I tell you—a million! ... That is what non-violence will do to the country." (p.19) Gian Talwar, however, asserts his faith in non-violence. How wrong he is proved in the episode, depicting his family feud. From now onwards, whatever happens in the novel is somehow related to violence and revenge. The world of violence is symbolically introduced with the entry of the Shiva image. In Konshet, Gian's creed of non-violence is put on trial, and it fails. The family feud between the little house and the big house results in the tragic murder of Hari at the hands of Vishnu Dutt and Gian realises the falsehood of non-violence:

"Gian brooded, sick with guilt. 'Coward'... 'Coward!' he kept accusing himself, fanning the flame. Was that why he had embraced the philosophy of non-violence without from physical cowardice, not from courage? Was his non-violence merely that of the rabbit refusing to confront the hound?" (p.50) the central focus of A Bend in the Ganges is on revenge and violence. Each episode of the novel is structured on this reality of human life and Malgonkar shows false principles and superficial bonds of relationship. Hari, who had wasted a lot of money and time in winning the Piploda land case, finally realizes that violence alone can retrieve human dignity. Debi Dayal is faced with several questions raised by the partition violence, but he does not live to find their answers. While travelling in a train, he is discovered by Muslim rioters and, despite the protest of Mumtaz, is dragged out and killed. The sun is just then rising over the Punjab, but the son of Debi's fate is going to set:

"That was the last thing he ever saw: the rising sun in the land of the five rivers on the day of their freedom. The next second his eyes were blinded by a great flash of pain that seemed to shoot up from the center of him, as though a bomb had exploded between his loins." (p.369) The tragic murder of Debi Dayal and the way Mumtaz is separated

from him is one of the horrendous pictures of the novel depicted in the form of violence. A Bend in the Ganges shows that the creed of non-violence and truth is merely a political expedite, which is certainly not applicable in real life. The theme of violence and revenge find full articulation in the novel as noticed in the personal stories of Gian Talwar's tragic heroism, Debi's patriotism, Ramoshi's observance of the demands of tribal justice. One can feel that the ideology of non-violence has not been given the same gripping and powerful treatment as the theme of violence and revenge in this novel. Concluding his study of violence in this novel, H.G.S Arulandram has also observed: "Malgonkar seems to believe in the existence of force and violence as an inevitable element in human nature. He is not like Tolstoy and Gandhi who preach nonviolence. As a writer, he probes the causes of and the use of violence in its maniacal force, its myriad forms, and motivations for revenge." (5)

Conclusion

The theme of revenge and violence in the novel address the consequences of these elements on characters' lives and the broader socio-cultural context, leaving readers with reflections on the enduring impact of historical turmoil. Human nature itself is made of violence and revenge. Manohar Malgonkar forcefully explores the reality of violence but at the same time shows its destructive and self-consuming powers. A Bend in the Ganges presents an epic portrayal of the historical reality of partition. The novel is like Khushwant Singh's novel, *A Train to Pakistan* in which he has described the horrible conditions that followed just after India's independence, which resulted in biggest human migration in the history. The author elucidates on the issues like humanity, non-violence, violence, communal disharmony, and disintegration in the novel. Revenge and violence in A Bend in the Ganges is profound, shaping the characters and the larger narrative. It highlights the destructive nature of these elements, illustrating how personal vendettas and historical conflicts can lead to lasting scars on individuals and communities. The novel depicts the ripple effects of revenge and violence, portraying the intricate connections between personal choices and societal consequences.

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