

Moral Degeneration in the novels of Manohar Malgonkar

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ABSTRACT

Manohar Malgonkar shares with most of his predecessors and contemporary novelists the depiction of immediate socio-political scenario marked by exasperation at the crippling creed which fetters people. He lays bare the machination of post-independence crop of professional politicians and unscrupulous leaders. Another unpalatable aspect of post – independence reality captured authentically by Malgonkar is the spreading tentacles of bureaucracy under the guise of democracy.

Manohar Malgonkar (1913-2010) shares the concern of other practitioners of fiction in Indo-English fiction with the immediate scenario in all its socio-political nuances. He puts history to creative use in his novels. He brings his artistic armoury to play and infuses colour and blood in to the bare facts of history. Malgonkar's most distinctive characteristic as a novelist, after historical perspective is his perception of socio-political situation of India. His use of a novel as a chronicle leads him to the probing analysis of diverse ramifications of the sociological, political, cultural and philosophical malaise the country is suffering from: Inequality, discrimination, corruption, indifference of the ruled and unconcern of the rulers, passivity, status quoism etc. In the post independence period the chronicling is invested with pertinent political nuances. The mushrooming of the post- independence crop of self- seeking and unscrupulous leaders at the grass- root level is another facet of the current scenario which does not escape the painstaking chronicler in Malgonkar. Another unpalatable aspect of post – independence reality captured authentically by Malgonkar is the spreading tentacles of bureaucracy under the guise of democracy.

Malgonkar reveals his contempt for unscrupulous politicians as he introduces Lala Vishnu Saran Dev (The Distant Drum)¹ stamping in to Kiran Garud's office with a three day growth of a beard on his chin and his mouth full with a juice of a pan. He takes a chair uninvited and announces belligerently:

"I yam the chairman aaf the Dishtrict Caangrus Committee" (p.59)². He wants the regimental Shamiana "Shent to the shity haal garden" where a "resheption" is to be held. When Colonel Garud points out that the regimental shamiana is never lent for political function, The politician in the Lala bares his fangs: "Coynelsaab", he said. "the paalitikal party aaf which you taak so lightly is ruling thish country today. The days of treating us as a sheditious aarganization are gone. Now the party and the gourment are the shame"(p. 60)³.

During the negotiations for the signing of the Instrument of Accession, Abhay (The Princes)⁴ comes in contact with the Indian politicians and bureaucrats. He feels himself "in the presence of something in which the soul had been deadened and what remained was a covering of scar tissue (P. 297)⁵.

The prince was disallowed even his mother's jewellery, even the customary bridal ornaments because he did not give any coverage – as they say in business ten percent. (The percentage theory becomes rampant as soon as the bureaucrats get the power to assess and classify the prince's jewellery) "The compensation officers have been openly asking for money, that is what they want" (P. 354)⁶. During the meeting Harikishore, the petty bureaucrat shows some more unpleasant aspects of his personality - typical of his species. He puts his finger sometimes on the letter of the law and sometimes on the spirit. Kanakchand is found drunk when Abhay visits him although he champions prohibition in Public. The faithless beneficiary, the ungrateful subject, the minister, the leader has been shown as coward, cunning mean and immoderate.

Jugal Kishore (Combat of Shadows)⁷ is another Malgonkar's recurrent image of Indian politicians, "capable of being damned awkward over a question of rights, dangerous, cunning, vindictive, soft and yielding whenever it suited him, but equally capable of violent recoil" (P.68)⁸. Sudden Dart gives a true account of these politicians.

Politics are his business, just as growing tea is yours and mine. We grow tea for no other reason than because it gives us the where withal to live according to our standards, he goes into politics for much the same reason. (P. 225)⁹.

And there is only one aim, one motive force- money and not nationalism that they pretend to serve. Jugal Kishore being such a practitioner of politics is "wholly amendable- to listen to reason, when reason is accompanied by the tinkle of rupees (p.226)¹⁰. Bhattacharya seems to echo Gandhi. "Those men who were the prison guards of yesterday's slavery may present themselves as "the guardians of tomorrow's freedom" to perpetuate their hegemony¹¹. Lala Vishnu Saran Dev in Distant Drum, Kanakchand in The Princes, Jugal Kishore in Combat of Shadows are amoral, power crazy politicians - corrupt, high handed, immodest, mean, spiteful and even malicious. Malgonkar gives a fairly accurate picture of these post-independence politicians, a phenomenon brought about by prospects of impending freedom. He actually denounces these opportunists, pot-bellied, dhoti clad ministers of free India

“who being upstarts were insensitive to finer human feelings (p.297)¹².

Tekchand(A Bend in the Ganges)¹³, the prosperous industrialist who is hardly alive to the political problems of the country, has his moments of public awareness as far as people of India were concerned. Gandhi’s message was merely a political expedients, “for the bulk of them, it had no deeper significance” (p.333)¹⁴, for most of the people swearing by non-violence it was only an expedient to shelter their cowardice (p.19)¹⁵ behind the tenants of non-violence.

The Garland Keepers¹⁶has politics not fully subsumed in art. It is an indictment of infringement of human rights and gross abuse of power in Emergency. Although Malgonkar asserts in Author’s note to the novel, that the novel is not based on the Emergency of 1975-77, but a “fictional one supposedly imposed some years later¹⁷,” it is evident that it draws inspiration from these events and is intended to drive home subtly the lessons of Emergency. The novel depicts how during this Emergency, the entire power set up can be used to serve the political ends of the top leaders. The Emergency in all its political and human fall out is graphically painted: news blacked out, bureaucracy politicized, arrest, suspension under MISA. The Great leader and his son rule over the country as their personal jagir, throwing all procedure and norms to wind. The police turn out to be puppets in the hands of power crazy politicians and are put to all sorts of shameful deeds. People are “uprooted overnight, herded like cattle, taken to the country- side and left in the middle of nowhere to make new lives for themselves (p.52)¹⁸.

Cactus Country¹⁹ reveals the lengthening shadows of fundamentalism and obscurantism in Pakistan. Punjabis who considered themselves Brahmins of Pakistan’s caste system, the masters, the chosen people were unable to accept the predictable democratic verdict of elections of 1970as it was unthinkable for them to allow themselves to be governed by the despised Bengalis, resulting in military onslaught on the unsuspecting Eastern Wing.

It was to be a midnight raid against a country, which was why the army was to be used In a novel role: as batches of policemen swooping down at a hundred places at once. Sheikh Mujib and his principal lieutenants were to be nabbed in their homes. If they resisted, they were to be shot (p.85)²⁰.

Apart from his novels his stories also reveal his sensitiveness to the political activities in India. “Pull Push”, in the words of G.S.Amar,“is a metaphor for the pulls and pressures that the writer sees in operation at every level of our social and political life”(p.36). In this world of politics, a class IV employee like Sukhpal in “Pull Push”, with his powerful power political affiliations can checkmate easily a top executive like Malhotra. The corruption at all levels, from the chaprasi to the Chief-minister stands fully exposed. In “A Slice of the Melon”, he passes ironic comments on the politicians who in the name of party funds, promote their material concerns.

References

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