

## Cultural Conflicts In Manohar Malgonkar's A Bend In The Ganges

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### Abstract

Manohar Malgonkar's *\*A Bend in the Ganges\** vividly portrays the cultural conflicts that arise during India's struggle for independence and the Partition of 1947. The novel explores the ideological, religious, and personal clashes between individuals caught in the turbulence of history. It highlights the deep divisions between Gandhian non-violence and revolutionary extremism, as seen in the contrasting beliefs of the protagonists, Gian and Debi. Gian, a follower of Gandhian principles, struggles to uphold non-violence in a world increasingly dominated by aggression, while Debi and his associates believe in armed resistance against British rule. This ideological battle reflects the larger cultural conflict within Indian society at the time. Furthermore, the novel delves into the religious discord between Hindus and Muslims, exacerbated by political manipulations and historical grievances. The communal tensions reach a climax during Partition, where friends turn into enemies, and violence engulfs the nation. Malgonkar presents the betrayal, revenge, and suffering that arise from these cultural conflicts, showing how individuals are forced to confront their identities in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. The novel also critiques the hypocrisy and contradictions within both the revolutionary and nationalist movements, questioning the true cost of freedom when it is accompanied by immense human suffering. Through its gripping narrative and complex characters, *\*A Bend in the Ganges\** provides a powerful commentary on how cultural conflicts shape history and human relationships. It serves as a reminder that ideological and religious divisions, when fueled by hatred and violence, can lead to irreversible consequences. Malgonkar's portrayal of cultural conflicts remains relevant even today, as societies continue to grapple with the challenges of co-existence, nationalism, and ideological extremism.

**Keywords:** Cultural Conflict, Partition of India, Gandhian Non-violence vs. Revolutionary Extremism, Communal Tensions, Identity Crisis

Indo-Anglian Literature, like any other modern literature, draws its vitality not necessarily from the unity and harmony of the culture from which it has originated, but rather from a sense of diversity, contradiction and even paradox. The pictures of collision between the opposing values and cultures have been artistically portrayed by a number of Indo-Anglian novelists. Manohar Malgonkar, heading as one of the front ranking successful novelists, who shot into limelight with his first novel *The Distant Drum* (1960), dwells upon in his novels the harmony of different cultures, regions, and communities as a result of social contacts and political needs and at the same time, shows the cultural clashes on account of the partition of the country.

In Malgonkar's novel *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), which deals with the pre-independence phase of Indian history; the world of *A Bend* consists of all sorts of people individuals, groups, villagers, city dwellers, bureaucrats, administrators-from atleast three different nationalities: Indians, Europeans, and Japanese. Prof. GS. Amur says: "With the exception of his first novel, '*Distant Drum*', a romance with a fairy tale ending, all his novels deal with the Tchekhovian theme of disintegration and disillusionment and have a relevance not only to life in India but elsewhere as well. This is particularly true of a novel like '*A Bend in the Ganges*' which raises the fundamental issue of the meaning of violence and non-violence." So long as there is one vital issue i.e, getting independence and chasing away the British Empire, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs all stand united in this mission, but with the partition of the country, they particularly Hindus and Muslims turn out to be avowed enemies, for their cultures come into conflict.

Even among Hindu characters there is the conflict of ideology some professing non-violence as the sole means to achieve freedom and the others declaring violence. Much of the action in the novel seems to hinge on the conflict between these two, opposing forces, directly or indirectly. In '*A Bend in the Ganges*', there figure the lives and fortunes of three young men Gian Talwar, Devi Dayal, and Shafi Usman- all taken from different cultural backgrounds, but have one thing in common: they are all freedom fighters.

In the very opening Chapter 'A Ceremony of Purification', the ideas of two cultures- British and Indian are seen conflicting with each other. In the presence of Mahatma Gandhi, the slogans of the people, burning the British garments, are heard:

"Boycott British goods! Mahatma Gandhi- ki jai!

Victory to Mahatma Gandhi !"

Gian Talwar who happens to see Mahatma Gandhi for the first time, gets impressed with the slogans and throws away his elegant British blazer into the fire and becomes the-follower of the foot-steps of Mahatma Gandhi and his technique of non-violence. On the other hand, Devi Dayal and Shafi, both members of the

terrorist groupe thoroughbred nationalists but believers in active militant action called "The Freedom Fighters", have no faith in Gandhi's ideology of Ahimsa. Malgonkar delineates such difference of the creeds-non-violence and violence-in the same Chapter through the conversation between Shaft and Gian. Shafi (viz, Singh in disguise) opposes non- violence:

"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 the country.'"

Gian reacts to it and says:

"Ahimsa is the noblest of creeds: There can be nothing more sacred. No man has the right to raise his hand against another, whatever the provocation. I shall never do it. It takes greater courage; non-violence is not for the weak."

Malgonkar simultaneously exposes the hypocrisy and emptiness of the Mahatma's disciples like Gian who soon discovers in the next Chapter captioned "Home Coming' that his light-hearted acceptance of Ahimsa cannot serve him as a philosophy of life itself. Confronted with the reality of violence involved in his brother's murder, he seeks out Vishnu Dutt and kills him, unmindful of his vows to practise the Mahatma's creed. Afraid of facing odds and physical punishment, he abandoned the Gandhian prin, ciples of hones y and self-purification. Wherever he went and whatever he did, every time and in all circumstances, he betrayed his friends and took undue advantage of their friendship.

In the Chapter, 'Angry Young Men', we, on one hand, find a very fine example of harmony of cultures-Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs forming united front under the name of 'Ram and Rahim club' to oust Britishers from India. The leader of that terrorist group is Shafi. All the members, irrespective of their religious differences through which the Britishers had taken the fullest advantage by dividing the Hindus against the Muslims andthe Sikhs against the both", carry their activities undetected. 'Jai Ram! answered by Jai - Rahim!" is their secret mode of greeting. As Malgonkar describes:

"Their oath of initiation was signed in blood, blood drawn from the little finger of the left hand. Their meetings always ended with their partaking of a cury made of equal parts of beef and pork, symboHsing the flouting of the sacred impositions of all the religions of India.... The Hindus and Sikhs venerated the cow; she was the go-mata the Muslims abhorred the pig as an unclean, unholy animal. After eating a dish made of pork and beef, no Hindu-Muslim or Sikh could practise his religion."

But we also find, on the other hand, how gradually drop by drop, communal poison soured and embittered the lives of the freedom fighters and converted them into communal fanatics.. The 'terrorist movement' - a symbol of national solidarity degenates into communal hatred and violence. Shafi, once a

bosom friend of Debi and Hindus, is tempted to the instigation of Hafiz Khan, the erstwhile leader of the terrorist movement. Hafiz's feelings and those of the members of the Muslim League find expression in the papers like the 'Dawn', the 'Awaz', the 'Subah' and the 'Sulah' The conversation between Shafi and Hafiz is quoted here to show the cultural hatred:

"I am surprised at you t 'Hafiz said with passion, his beady, tormented eyes taking straight into Shafi's." "We who once ruled this country as conquerors shall be living here as inferior citizens, as the slaves of Hindus! Unless we heed the warnings and stand up for ourselves..... The enemies of the moment are not the British; they are the Hindus.""

Shafi apprehends the danger of the Hindu-Muslim clash and rejecting his plea, he remarks:

"But this is just playing into the hands of the British. They went to keep the Hindus, and the Muslims divided, so that they can go on ruling. Our only salvation ties in solidarity-that is the only way to oust the British."

The conversation between Hafiz and Shafi has a great significance as it reflects the Muslim line of thought before the partition of India. It shows the conversion of the Muslims, who earlier devoted themselves to communal solidarity, intofanatical Mohammedans. Shafi at last surrenders to the teaching of Hafiz and his anti-Hinduism is seen in his cautioning only Muslims to escape the raid on the Hanuman club and getting Devi Dayal and other Hindus arrested. Malgonkar expresses the view explicitly:

"And then he suddenly realized that all those who would be in the club at the time of the raid would be Hindus, there would not be a single Muslim among them."

In the Chapter entitled, 'Anatomy of Partition', there is a vivid description of the conflicts of values and culture between the Hindues and the Muslims owing to the 1947 riots in the Punjab. The Muslims decide that no Hindus should remain in that part of India, which is going to be theirs. The partition concerns: "Tens of millions of people had to flee, leaving every-thing behind; Muslims from India, Hindus and Sikhs from the land-that was soon to become Pakistan: two great rivers of humanity flowing in opposite directions, Malgonkar present matter-of-fact pictures of this religious feud:

"As a background to this great, two-way migration, religious civil war was being waged all over the country; a war fought in every village and town and city where the two communities came upon each other..... The administration had collapsed, the railways had stopped functioning..... mobs ruled the streets, burning, looting, killing, dishonouring women, and mutilating children; even animals sacred to the other community became the legitimate targets of reprisals.""

The 1947 riots take Shafi, once united against the Britishers, but now fighting on communal ground, to Lahore, where he finds Debi Dayal's father Dewan Tekchand, sister Sundari and mother, at his mercy, Thirsting for revenge on Devi, who had taken his beloved Mumtaz, Shafi makes advances towards Sundari, which Tekchand objects:

"I implore you, in the name of all that is sacred to you, your prophet Mohammad himself, not to touch them, your sisters..."

At this Shafi reacts:

"Sisters!"..... ts that how you Hindus treated our women? Like sisters and mothers! They were raped in front of their own men; in Nabha, Patiala; in Delhi itself. Raped, mutilated- they weren't sisters then !"

The freedom and partition have brought misery and misfortunes to thousands of people on both the sides of the borders. In a refugee train from Kernal to Pakistan, the journey of Debi Dayal and his Muslim wife Mumtaz in disguise of a Muslim couple presents the terrible sight of religious frenzy. It is now the dawn of the 15th of August when Debi's train comes to a halt in Pakistan region. In his heart he greets. the sun of liberty but at the same time he is pained to see the cruelties of communalism. The Hindus, travelling in disguises with the Muslims are found out and killed. At last Devi and even Mumtaz since she is accompanying as a wife to a Hindu, fall victims to the orgy of violence and bloodshed. Malgonkar himself says in 'Author's Note':

"Only the violence in this story happens to be true; it came in the wake of freedom, to become a part of India's history, What was achieved through non-violence, brought with it one of the bloodiest upheavals of history; twelve million people had to flee, leaving their homes; nearly half a million were killed over a hundred thousand women, young and old, were abducted, raped, mutilated."

Malgonkar is certainly not commanding violence as a way of life, in preference to the Gandhian principle of non-violence, he is simply exposing the hypocrisy of those followers of Gandhi who pay lip service to non-violence, but have really violence bottled up in them. In his review of the novel in 'The Book Man', Richard Church remarks:

The general impression is similar to that which moves 'War and Peace'; the portrayal of the larger tides of human life when something occurs to rouse them to insanefury. .... A novel could not convincingly contain more violence than this tale of the sub-continent during the past quarter of a century. It is not likely that we shall be given a more revealing, a more sanely balanced, or a more terrifying account of those years. The paradox of life is there, and out of it the author has made a work of art."

A Bend in the Ganges' is panoramic in scope and epic in aspiration.crowded with events from modem Indian history. The open form of the

novel is artistically satisfactory as it is in keeping with the slice of life it has represented. The powerful characterisation, subtle nuances in style, the evocative descriptions and recreations of the milieu and the moment and, above all, the fine achievement of form in the face of vresistant, recalcitrant and inchoate matter" mark this out as a classic of moderm Indo-Anglian fiction. Prof, Amur says, "E.M. Forster selected 'A Bend in the Ganges' as the best book of the year and it is, perhaps, the best he has. published so far

It attains almost an 'epic grandeur 'in projecting the frenzy image of the generation- the generation of Shafi Usmans, Devi Dayals, Gyan Talwars, Juggut Singhs, Syams, Jotins, as well as of Nalinis that became "truly lost" in the 'Forties' as a consequence of the conflicts of values and cultures. The same Hindus; Muslims, and Sikhs, so long as there is a common issue before them (to oust the Britishers), get united, form clubs and associations, but they get degenerated into fanaticism, communal hatred and violence, the moment their cultures are in danger.

### Notes & References

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