

**MANOHAR MALGONKAR'S *COMBAT OF SHADOWS*:
A TRI-POLAR STRUGGLE OF IDENTITY AND SURVIVAL**

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Abstract

Manohar Malgonkar one of the prominent fictionists of the independent India, has registered his name in the list of those prolific writers who have always been concerned with the past of the country, in order to analyse its significance for the present of the country. In *Combat of Shadows* (1962), Malgonkar has narrated the story of a tea plantation with the characters drawn from three different worlds the Indian social structure during the pre independence days namely: coolies, the British and the Anglo –Indian into, "validly realized fiction". This paper proposes to probe description of tri –polar struggle of conflict of interest among the three races. Through the protagonists Henry Winton manager of the Silent Hill tea estate, Ruby Miranda the Anglo Indian girl and Gauri the Coolie woman. Henry is torn in conflict between the opposite shadows of desire and aversion. The shadows of desire take him to a number of women – to Gauri, Ruby and Jean. Finally, in his clash of desire and aversion Winton meets his tragic death, in the Game cottage, like the wild beasts. Besides tensions and uncertainties of Winton's life, the novel also depicts the poor condition of workers and the corruption of the tea garden.

Malgonkar's novel, *Combat of Shadows*, set in the tea plantation of Assam, at a time when the world was facing the horrors of the Second World War, 'depicts the east-west collision in brilliant colours.' The novel is usually praised for its proficient narrative. But, for more than anything else, it weaves the multifarious thread of human relationship, which is the most laudable feature of the novel.

The title *Combat of Shadow* in the broad sense, refers to the eternal struggle of mankind. To be more specific, here it is the struggle of the opposite drives of the races, colours, and countries, of the rulers and the ruled of the exploiters and the exploited, and above all it is the struggle of the opposite shadows of desire and aversion, which the epigraph of the novel remarkably suggests,

Desire and Aversion are opposite shadows. Those who allow them- selves to be

overcome by their struggle cannot rise to knowledge of reality. (*Indian Novel in English*, p.126)

The above epigraph has been abstracted from a sloka from the *Bhagwat Gita*. The Struggle is reflected in the very theme of the novel. The struggle is between the ruling class represented by the British and the ruled ones, i.e. the native Indians working on the tea plantations of Assam as labourers. The struggle is threefold here - first, it is for the freedom of the country from the British Empire, and secondly, it is for the basic human rights, which are the birth rights of every single individual, thirdly we also see a struggle going on in the lives of central characters. The British were here to make the maximum profit and to fulfil their ends; they were here to exploit whatever means and resources came across their way. This propensity led to the serious exploitation of the coolies working on the tea plantations. This theme of exploitation and revolt against the exploitation provides the backdrop to the novel, as Arjun Kumar puts it, *Combat of Shadows* articulates the problematic predicament of the labourers of tea plantation of Assam in a very realistic way.

On the personal level of characters in the novel, 'shadows' are of 'desire' and 'aversion'. It is the struggle of these shadows which generates the interest of the novel, as Arjun Kumar aptly states: 'The writer endeavours to express how two shadows of desire and aversion are always active to take possession of the soul of man.'

The time in which the novel is placed was one of conflicts and clashes: different countries and communities were at daggers drawn. The conflict which this novel deals with is tri polar as it involves the above mentioned three communities each fighting for its own interests, dreams and rights. It is through the character of Henry Winton, an Englishman, full of racial snobbery, that the author has tried to bring out the conflict of these communities as Amur puts it nicely,

Thus the moral disintegration and defeat of the hero is a process which is put in motion and completed by his multi pointed racial relationship involving conflicts with the Indians, the Anglo Indians and the British. The racial encounter in its turn finds its focal point in the hero and is defined strictly in terms of his own drama. (*Manohar Malgonkar p.61*)

Henry, who belongs to the rulers' race, is proud of his colour and language, has got a low opinion about the 'black Indians' and the mixed blooded Anglo- Indians. Henry's encounter with India is depicted through the characters of Gauri, Jugal Kishor, Pasupati and Sarkar and the one-tusked elephant representing India symbolically, is Winton's only encounter with the deeper aspects of Indian life.'

The first of these characters, Henry comes into contact with is Gauri, whom Winton catches stealing a sack of tea leaves. Gauri gives first shock to his arrogance as he finds her incredibly attractive and lets her go scot free. Henry had been living an artificial life because of the fear of getting contaminated by coming into contact with Indians. Gauri is the first challenge to his claptrap of morality. Cockburn describes him, "a virtuous psalm singing bastard." Second time when Henry meets, Gauri, she is at his mercy. She comes to him with her uncle Jugal Kishore for the job of the school teacher at his plantation. For this favour from Henry she is even ready to be his mistress. Since the idea of having an Indian mistress is unbearable to him, he rejects her offer most coldly calling her a thief.

Third time when Gauri is face to face with Henry, she is not a timid and weak woman at his mercy or trying to escape from his grasp, but as the author puts it, 'an outraged temple goddess.' During the strike, led by Gauri, Henry thrashes her brother brutally and she swears to

kill him. "I shall kill you for this, you white monster. I shall kill you". But Gauri's revenge is accomplished in a more dramatic way. It is she who acquaints him with the reality of his English wife, who loves Eddie Trevor, an Anglo Indian. In a fit of depression Henry tries to strike Gauri. She avoids the blow and makes a scathing mockery not only of Henry false sense of pride and duality but of the English community as a whole. It is clear that Gauri on ordinary coolie woman, becomes a symbol of challenge of the one race to another and gives a hard blow to Henry's racial superiority. C.M. Mohan Rao rightly remarks:

The very name Gauri is symbolical of feminine strength and power in Hindu mythology and it seems that the novelist choose this name with a purpose. (*Manohar Malgonkar and Portrait of the Hero in his Novels P.136*)

Another character who represents India is Jugal Kishore, the chief stockman and local coolie leader who later becomes the Minister for Plantation, poses, Political threat to Winton's career in India. Both of these characters know each other very well and that is the cause for their mutual hatred. It is Jugal Kishore who really understands the truth of Henry's existence, and pinpoints his problem. Jugal Kishore also guesses rightly Henry's fear of the one-tusked elephant. On the reappearance of the elephant, Henry, in order to avoid facing it, wants to join the war but Jugal Kishore makes it impossible for Henry to leave the plantation without killing the elephant. Jugal Kishore challenges Henry and in turn the entire English race. But on the whole, Jugal Kishore does not make a truly patriotic leader of the day. He is a representative of the corrupt politicians whose concerns were purely selfish. He has been portrayed very much in the vein of Lala Vishnu Saran Dev in *Distant Drum*_(1960), who in the disguise of patriotism were actually backing the British empire. As Amur puts it:

Jugal Kishore, in spite of his opportunistic nationalism, is not an enemy of the British. He was a favourite of Wallach, Winton's predecessor, and gets on very well with Sudden Dart and the other planters. (*Manohar Malgonkar p.63*)

The one-tusked rouge elephant is an Indian symbol, and Henry's moral degradation in India begins with the chase of this elephant. Elephant is an instrument which serves to demolish his well-nourished image as a hunter and in turn his racial pride. The elephant appears twice in the novel and both the times its encounter is devastating for Henry. At the first instance, he somehow saves his life, leaving his shikari Kistulal to his inevitable death. Here, he fails as a hunter, for he is responsible for Kistulal's death. The second time when the one tusker appears, it poses a bigger challenge before Henry. By now he has developed a sense of fear for the elephant god. When he conspires, and succeeds in getting Eddie Trevor killed by the elephant, the process of his moral degradation on foreign soil is complete.

The English not only felt disgusted towards the Indians but they also had fears and apprehensions from them. It was a fear of losing control over a hard won land. They were particularly afraid of Indians politicians, as they were forever creating nuisance against the empire specially their demand for more power was a cause of concern for them. The British never wanted to quit Indian so easily.

Besides tracing the ruler-ruled racial conflict there is still another race in conflict with the Britishers, and it is the Anglo - Indian community. The Anglo- Indians with their half English and half Indian blood were in search of their identity. This agony of 'rootlessness' has been presented here through Henry's relationship with Ruby and Eddie Trevor.

It is Ruby's attraction which forces Henry to withdraw his oath of not having any

involvement with Indian or Anglo Indian women. He offers her the job of school teacher on his plantation. The relation which develops between Ruby and Henry is an essential result of the racial distinction which existed in the pre- Independent India. More than anything else, it is only a self-seeking mentality which is at the core of this relationship. Henry with his passion for Ruby and the latter with her ambition to join the English world get involved in this relationship. When Henry asks about Ruby's family, she is fired with the hope that he may marry her. The novelist's comment make clear Ruby's Inner most desire in the following manner:

Above all, she could never laid bare to any outsider her own personal dream of becoming some day a sahib's lady, going into the reserved, all white club, with her head held high, escorted by an English man without the slightest trace of coloured blood and then of settling down in a cool, antiseptic wholly English suburb and washing away the contamination of India and Tinapur..(*Combat of Shadows*, p.99)

Ruby Miranda, fails to overcome these conflicting shadows of 'desire' and 'aversion'. Ruby's desire is to become a 'memsahib' in the world of ruling class. Ruby sees in Henry the ladder which will lead her to her destination. This desire of Ruby is exploited by Henry, we know that he is self-centred and only thinks of his position and race, but never has any consideration to the feeling of Ruby.⁵ Ruby's aversion is with her own circumstances and the country in which she lives. Both Henry and Ruby are the typical representatives of their respective races. The ruling British always had the desire to exploit everything that come their way and the Anglo Indians always tried to "keep up appearance and try to hide their poverty as well as their genealogy. They think of themselves as whole English and try to seek living kinship with the west."

Henry's relation with Eddy Trevor, the national level hockey player, also smacks of racial prejudice. Eddie, with his irresistible charm, is the blue eyed boy of entire locality. But Eddie's innocence and charm fail to produce any positive effect on Henry and his attitude towards Eddie is governed by the degrading passion of jealousy. Besides being an Anglo Indian what instigates Henry's hatred for Eddie is the latter's love for Ruby and then Jean's falling in love with Eddie. Henry is unable to understand as to how an all white women can be attracted towards an Anglo Indian. Henry suffers from a sense of inferiority before Eddie. The shock of being defeated in his personal life at the hands of his arch rival brings him to the door of committing the ghastly crime of murdering Eddie. After Eddie's death, Jean leaves Henry for good, and the Company's resident director turns out to be Eddie's real father. Finally, not only his Indian rivals but his own people too conspire against him and bring about his death.

Henry is a typical representative of the common Englishman who has no regards for the basic human instincts of love and kindness. For him the people belonging to other community are only object of disgust and hatred. As compared to Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), a novel on the theme of exploitation and corruption on Assam tea plantation area, Malgonkar's novel depicts the racial conflict among the English, the Anglo Indian and the Indians. The exploitation of the coolies on the tea plantation of Assam has been voiced in many works such as S.M. Akhtar is doctoral these entitled *Emigrant Labour of Assam*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Two leaves and a Bud*(1937), and Dr. P.H. Daniel's *Red Tea*_(1969). All these works reveal the inhuman conditions of the poor tea workers. The sufferings of tea workers depicted in these works were confirmed by the report of the Royal commission on labour.

In the light of the above analysis, it can be said that Malgonkar has not indulged himself in ghastly violence and cruelty as the other writers on the same theme have done. Neither has he

depicted here any pathetic figure like Gangu in *Two leaves and a Bud* or Daniels' coolie Karuppan in *Red Tea*, Malgonkar has however successfully revealed the suffering and exploitation of the coolies of Assam working on the tea plantations.

References

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2. G.S. Amur, *Manohar Malgonkar*, (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann India, 1973).
3. M. Mohan Rao, *Manohar Malgonkar and Portrait of the Hero in his Novels* (New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1993).
4. Manohar Malgonkar, *Combat of Shadows* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962). . Further references are from this edition and marked as *The Combat of Shadows* with pagination.