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Feministic Moralities in the Females of Manohar Malgonkar

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Abstract

The basic principles of feminist theory were not proposed by a single person but has evolved over centuries, nurtured by many writers, philosophers, campaigners and protesters. The outlook of the Indian woman in society has been a source of inspiration for the writers of Indian English literature. On one hand, she is worshipped as a goddess, but on the other hand, she is regarded as a slave in the society. Indian tradition considers women as sacred, and it is impossible to think of a society without them. Although the famous Indian writer in English Manohar Malgonkar has a reputation to deal with Western characters, and characters belonging to the affluent, Westernized class, and for exploring masculine themes, he differs from others in the portrayal of his female characters. Although his men and male protagonists are as courageous and bold as any other contemporary Indian hero, his women and his main female characters are described with a rare combination of beauty, brains, charm, and strong individualism. Although Malgonkar's women come from different races, social strata, religious backgrounds, educational levels and even different nations, they are primarily bold, fearless, uncompromising, compassionate and individuals firm in their stance. So, they are basically highly attractive and unpredictable individuals to the readers and uphold the tenets of feminism. The research paper is to critically analyse all the female characters of Manohar Malgonkar under the lens of 'feministic literary theory.' Malgonkar his portrayal of female characters often contains feminist undertones.

Keywords: *feministic literary theory, feministic waves, #MeToo, Intersectionality, societal morality, patriarchy*

The basic principles of feminist theory were not proposed by a single person but has evolved over centuries, nurtured by many writers, philosophers, campaigners and protesters. Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Bell Hooks may be credited for laying the foundation of modern feminism. First-wave feminism started in the late 19th century and largely focused on obtaining legal rights for women, particularly the right to vote. Second-wave feminism evolved in the period between the 1960s and the 1980s. This movement addressed many issues like reproductive rights, family, and workplace equality. Third-wave feminism evolved in the period between 1992 and the early 2010s. This movement focused on individuality, diversity, and inclusivity, which the second wave did not address. A new concept called 'intersectionality' was introduced in this wave. It is discrimination based on multiple

attributes like race, class, gender, disability status, and age. Fourth-wave feminism is in vogue from 2012 to present time and uses the social media to address issues like sexual harassment, violence against women, and rape culture, illustrated by the movements like, ‘#MeToo.’

The first basic doctrine of feminism is attaining social, political, and economic equality for all genders. The second basic doctrine is eradicating gender-based violence and encouraging sexual and bodily independence. The third basic doctrine is eliminating gender hierarchy by demolishing social constructions like patriarchy that create and sustain inequalities between genders. The fourth basic doctrine is to promote freedom in personal choices, like career, marriage, and other crucial stances in life.

The above principles of feminism are achieved through various measures that intend to derive full social, economic, and political equality for all genders. The first principle consists of achieving equal rights in education, employment and political participation for females. Feminism not only aims for equality for females but also for equity. Although equality is treating everybody in the same way, this may not speak about the barriers faced by the disadvantaged group. Thus, equity becomes a necessary means to provide an impartial justice to all. Equity is the impartial distribution of resources and opportunities to create equal benefit for all genders. Maternity leave is a typical example of equity, as it meets the specific needs of puerperal women in achieving genuine equality. By speaking about equality, we should not refuse maternity leave for women because we cannot give the same for men.

The second principle is granting the right for females to make decisions about their own bodies. It also includes eradicating gender-based violence, mental and sexual harassment, domestic abuse and ensuring their mental and physical safety. Feminism challenges the societal norms that objectify women and perpetuate sexual assault.

The third principle works by changing gender labels and narrow-minded customs that limit choices of females by destroying patriarchy. The patriarchy is a man-made social construct in which men hold prime power and authority over women by

controlling personal properties and other social or legal establishments for many generations. Turning over these power structures is the fundamental means to achieve gender equality and freedom from oppression. The fourth principle is ensured by widening the choices for females so that gender does not limit an individual’s opportunities or potential.

These doctrines are often broken down into definite goals, such as equal pay for equal work, equal representation in the workplace, equal voting and governing rights, the right to make personal choices about a female’s body, including reproductive rights, opposing intersectionality etc. These goals aim to create a more unbiased and impartial society for people of all genders. Intersectionality helps to organise combined movements that aim for simultaneous solutions for many forms of oppression. The principle of feminism got modified from a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to an ‘individualised approach’ for different women. For example, a Black woman, a differently abled woman, or an immigrant woman will not experience the same level of gender inequality compared to a white woman without any disability.

The outlook of the Indian woman in society has been a source of inspiration for the writers of Indian English literature. On one hand, she is worshipped as a goddess, but on the other hand, she is regarded as a slave in the society. Indian tradition considers women as sacred, and it is impossible to think of a society without them. In *A Bend in the Ganges*, Tekchand considers his wife as Goddess Lakshmi, “... that he had always thought of her as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. In his mind’s eye, she even resembled Lakshmi, as conjured up by Ravi Varma in his famous painting.” (*A Bend in the Ganges*, p. 255) But in a man-made society, a woman rebelling against any injustice is marked as bad and is immediately disciplined by the dominating man. Although the pre-colonial Indian writers in English expressed their women characters as submissive, the attitude of the post-colonial writers has undergone a considerable change from the traditional norms. This change in attitude is seen in the writers who have come into contact with a westernised and multicultural society. Manohar Malgonkar is one among them. Many of his female characters are rebellious to the rules of Indi-

an society.

Manohar Malgonkar was an ex-army officer, a journalist, a history researcher, a mine owner, a hunter and a wildlife conservationist. So, he has come into contact with various types of men and women belonging to various races, social strata, economic strata, and particularly with westernised people in the army. Malgonkar's popularity is not mainly in his writing style, plot and themes of his novel, but he differs from others in the portrayal of his characters. Although his men and male protagonists are as courageous and bold as any other contemporary Indian hero, his women and his main female characters are described with a rare combination of beauty, brains, charm, and strong individualism. Although Malgoankar's women come from different races, social strata, religious backgrounds, educational levels and even different nations, they are primarily bold, fearless, uncompromising, compassionate and individuals firm in their stance. So, they are basically highly attractive and unpredictable individuals to the readers and uphold the tenets of feminism.

The moral rules or morality distinguishes between good and bad behaviour in the society. These moral rules vary between different traditions, races, classes, nations and genders. Morality is basically decided by the culture and tradition from time to time. So, in the cultural evolution, any particular human activity was not continuously considered right or wrong at all times. Malgonkar exploits this continuously changing nature of morality in his novels. Malgonkar's moral rules are both rigid and, at the same time, flexible. Whether it is poor, uneducated women who represent most of India's women population like Gauri and Mumtaz; or rich, sophisticated Indian women like Bina and Sundari; or a tradition-bound Maharani of an Indian state and Tekchand Kerwad's wife Radha; or the Anglo-Indians who suffer from a strange inferiority complex despite their social status like Ruby and Minnie; or rich, educated, cultured English women like Margot and Jean, they are all alike in one sense: that they are rebellious against the oppressive patriarchal society. All of them face different kinds of problems under different circumstances, their outlook on morality also varies with the time and situation. But they are unified in upholding the tenets of feminism.

Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* is mainly a novel of the freedom movements and partition politics of India. Although the two male protagonists, Gian and Debi, the two equal and opposite forces, occupy the major part of the novel, it is the main female characters, Sundari and Mumtaz, who dominate the scenes and decide the direction of the story. It looks as if Jean in *Combat of Shadows* or Margot in *Distant Drum* has reappeared as Sundari in the novel. Jean never cares to let Henry know about her activities, just as Margot never cares about Bob. But Sundari's revenge is double in nature. On one hand, she proves to her husband, Gopal, that she can very well pay him back in his own way by having an extramarital relationship with Gian, and on the other hand, she shakes Gian's conviction, because Gian's betrayal at one juncture hurts her even more than that of her husband.

Sundari is married to Gopal under the bad times of her brother Debi's arrest. She makes unsuccessful attempts to enthusiastically respond to Gopal's love on their honeymoon. Gopal's indulgence in extramarital contact with his old girlfriend, Malini, at a crucial moment in her life, destroys her faith in her personality and her individuality. She rebels against tradition and leaves Gopal to return to her parents' home. Though the revenge is very well planned and carried out even more dramatically, it does not affect Gopal. Gopal does not realise the gravity of the situation, for him, faithfulness is not an end, and marriage is just an arrangement and an alliance of convenience. But for Gian, Sundari's marriage with Gopal is a shock and is something more than he expected because he believes that Sundari loves him. When Gian comes to rescue Sundari and her family in Duriabad during the riots of partition, she once again prefers to pick him up, although he was a degraded human being who had built his fortune on big lies. She slowly realises that Gian has changed, and she then accepts him. From her childhood, she teaches her brother Debi to be brave and strong. But her real victory is over Gian, for she succeeds in making a man out of a liar and a cheat.

Sundari is initially depicted as an erudite, educated, wealthy and somewhat audacious woman from a privileged family who is deeply attached to her revolutionary brother, Debi. She is also in a ro-

mantic relationship with her brother's friend, Gian Talwar. In the climax, she changes her nature entirely and becomes aggressive to endure mob violence. Her aggression in killing Shafi to retaliate for her mother's murder and for her safety from the mob shows her stance on the second feministic principle to stop gender-based aggression.

"Shafi was wriggling on the floor, shielding his head with his hands, and Sundari: stood above him, the Shiva from the Little House in her hands. Even as he was looking, he saw her bring it down on Shafi's head, and then, when the man rolled forward and lay limp on the carpet, he saw her bring it down again and again as though killing a scorpion or a spider, crashing in the dead man's skull until it cracked open and blood and brains spurted out in a red and white mess." (*A Bend in the Ganges*, p. 390)

An incarnation the goddess 'Kali' is seen here. She naturally stands as an ideal example for all four basic tenets of feminism.

Mumtaz is another main female character in *A Bend in the Ganges* who is a selfless, devoted woman and loyal partner to Debi-Dayal. In spite of her profession as a sex worker and religious background as a Muslim, she cares for her Hindu husband, Debi Dayal, with full devotion, who saved her from an acid attack by Shafi over her face. Her devotion is expressed through her words: "I brought bad luck to you,' Mumtaz would tell him. 'If it had not for me, you would never have damaged your hand.'" (*A Bend in the Ganges*, p. 325) Her selfless love is contrasting with Sundari's love of more calculative nature. In refusing to become the mistress of the brutal Shafi, who tries to disfigure her face, she demonstrates the fourth principle of feminism, freedom of personal choices. With her strong sense of self-respect, she also stands as an example for the basic tenets of feminism.

In Manohar Malgonkar's *Distant Drum*, one of the main female characters, Margot Medley, never gives a chance to others to understand her fully, for she never really cares where she stands in the lives of her men. When her husband, a British Major, Bob Medley, comes to know about her affair with a younger Indian officer, Kiran Garud, her bold attitude in a male-dominated world is ex-

pressed in her words, "No one can do anything. Nothing can be done now; just nothing," (*Distant Drum*, p. 29) She is seen to be embarrassing Kiran with her vivacious acts to sexually woo him. She is initially depicted as a dangerous lady, responsible for her husband's suicide. But later on, she is revealed to be an undisturbed, unapologetic and adjustable lady who rebuilds her life as a successful dress designer. She is a character who stands as an example for the principles of feminism.

Bina is also depicted as a stylish and rebellious character in *Distant Drum*. Bina's character serves to outsmart Margot in representing another aspect of feminism. She was likely to have a crush on Kiran even as a fifteen-year-old. But she never expresses this to Kiran even years later until she is sure of his love towards her. She dominates Kiran in all their meetings. Her determination to marry Kiran despite her father's refusal shows the fourth feministic principle in her, the freedom of choice. This is expressed through her reply to the tough Commanding Officer, Kiran, after he confirmed his love towards her, "I have never stopped loving you; only, I have never felt sure of you, not till now. At times, I doubted whether a man like you was capable of falling in love; I mean really and completely in love. I have often wondered if you were not deliberately preventing yourself ... from liking anyone." (*Distant Drum*, pp. 247, 248) She expresses her desire to get along with him after taking so much time and precaution. Kiran feels offended and feels like being caught during stealing by her above remarks and feels more deeply in love with her at that moment. When Bina says, "'Then I am not going to marry Arvind Mathur.' Her face was set and determined, and yet intensely pathetic; and he thought she had never looked more appealing, more desirable. He wanted to gather her in his arms and protect her and comfort her." (*Distant Drum*, p. 247) Thus, Bina is seen to slowly and steadily enter into the mind of Kiran, upholding her feministic stance in taking crucial decisions of life by herself and the freedom of choosing her personal choice in life.

Manohar Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows* depicts three prominent women characters, Ruby Miranda, Jean Walters, and Gauri, mainly through their relationships with the protagonist, the British tea estate manager, Henry Winton. Their lives explore

themes of search for identity, struggle against racial discrimination, class discrimination, and gender oppression during the years of British rule in India. Ruby represents the internal conflict and social struggles of the women in the Anglo-Indian community who is caught between two cultures, the British and Indian, and rejected by both cultures. Jean represents the isolation and disappointment of the British women who came to India with big dreams of a colonial life. Gauri represents the emerging political awareness and upheaval of the native Indians against the colonial rulers.

Ruby Miranda is aggressively ambitious and desires to marry the Englishman, Henry Winton, to elevate her social status by becoming a 'memsahib' to the Indians. She wants to gain the colonial powers and escape the prejudice against her Anglo-Indian heritage. But Henry returns from a vacation to England with a British wife, Jean Walters. Ruby's hopes are destroyed, her unfulfilled desire and subsequent humiliation that she faces turn into revenge. She struggles with her identity and desperately tries to blend with the British by developing a relationship with Winton. But Winton hires Ruby as a headmistress of the estate school primarily to make her his mistress. When Henry tries to engage her sexually after his marriage with Jean, she retaliates the assault: "No, no!" Ruby spat out, pushing herself away with all her strength and suddenly losing all control of herself. 'No, you brute! You white swine! I hate you—I hate you! I don't have to take anything from you any more—that or anything else. You go and do that to that all-white English bitch you have married—not to me!"' (*Combat of Shadows*, p. 150) The rejected Ruby takes revenge on Henry Winton for his deceit. She upholds the tenets of feminism by opposing racial discrimination, gender discrimination and the patriarchy of the society.

Jean's arrival to the Silent valley estate after marrying Henry Winton creates a ripple and changes the novel's course. Her marriage to Henry quickly becomes stressed as she is innocent about the prevailing social dynamics, racial prejudices of colonial life, and his relationship with the Anglo-Indian, Ruby Miranda. "I know that you are still infatuated with her, deep within yourself. I can feel it; I can feel it every time you look at me, eve-

ry time you hold me in your arms, every time you make love to me—you are always comparing, always wondering to yourself whether you have made the right decision. You have never given me your whole hearted love, Henry, although you have demanded it from me. You have always held back—and that a woman can never forgive.' (*Combat of Shadows*, p. 198) The above lines are the painful and honest disclosure of Jean. Any woman, whether Indian, Anglo-Indian, or British, requires genuine love from her partner, and they don't forgive any form of deceit in the relationship with men. She later enters into an affair with an Anglo-Indian hockey star, Eddie Trevor, who is the old boyfriend of Ruby. This intensifies Henry's jealousy and hatred over Eddie. Jean's British status aids the racial divide that cuts Winton's long-term relationship with Ruby and sexual encounters with Gauri. These complicated interracial, extramarital relationships and the feministic ideals of all three women lead to the death of the dominating Henry.

Gauri is the niece of Jugal Kishore, an Indian chief stockman of the estate. Gauri's interactions with Henry Winton has been mostly unpleasant due to her Indian status and the rivalry between Henry and Jugal Kishore because he organises a labour strike at the tea plantation. Gauri also takes revenge against Winton for his deceit and sexually exploiting her previously. The worst punishment given to your abuser is exposing his inability or weakness. Gauri gives this punishment to Henry by exposing in person the secret sexual encounter of his wife Jean and Eddie at the Wallach's Folly, the highest point in the estate. "Yes, go on abusing me. That's all you can do. Abuse and hit the Indians and their women, because you are impotent to punish a man who is taking your wife right before your eyes, and even coolie on the garden knows it. Look! Look! If I am dirty-minded, take a good look at that clean white wife of yours!" (*Combat of Shadows*, p. 198) In this situation she stands as a testimony of upholding the tenets of feminism by boldly challenging a dominant Englishman about his weakness and inability to act.

Prominent women characters in Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princes* are the Maharani, Bibi-bai and Minnie. The females are given a secondary status in the patriarchal royal families, which they try to

resist, and to attain freedom from oppression. The Maharani, queen of the princely state of Bedar, is a typical example of female oppression. She is dignified with her royal status in the eyes of the outside world. But internally she is a neglected wife for having 'white foot' and for bringing bad luck. She suffers silently while the Maharaja openly includes many concubines in the palace. Her quiet struggle highlights the injustices faced by women, even those in positions of apparent power. "I am no longer something to be hidden like sin, hidden behind bamboo curtains as though I had some kind of deformity. It was— it was like being an animal, a leper kept in segregation, until I went away, preferring to be a woman of the streets, as you have said, to being a Maharani in darkness . . . never knowing what it was to be a complete woman." (*The Princes*, p. 290) A woman always craves to be complete and not to be oppressed under anybody's control.

In upholding feminism, she does not regret leaving the palace with the palace officer, Abdulla Jan. In a symbolic act of resistance, she finds freedom by moving to Pakistan after the partition of India. She finds her contentment as a wife and a woman in his companionship. When her son, Abhay, forthrightly calls her a whore, she replies, "I was one, all these years, when I lived with a man in sin. But remember, I had been abandoned by my husband. . . but not a whore any more now that I'm married! . . . I am the wife, the lady of the house, a share in the joys and sorrows of my husband. Here I was nothing." (*The Princes*, pp. 289, 290) Malgonkar makes it possible for the orthodox Maharani to denounce her royal status, dance in the nightclubs, and even change her religion and still not regret it, to demonstrate ideals of feminism in this character.

Bibi-bai is the Maharaja's first concubine. She had a son named Charudutta with him before he married the Maharani. It is suggested that she attempted to poison Abhay, the prince of succession, to secure the throne for her own son. Her character highlights the bitter and cunning conflict that could arise from the concubine system. But she is a dominant, bold lady who knew the knack of seducing and controlling the Maharaja for twelve years until the conspiracy was suspected. Amina Begam is a Muslim dancer from Simla. She is the

Maharaja's second concubine, who replaced Bibi-bai after the Maharaja suspected her of disloyalty. Sherawathi is a dancer from Tanjore Temple. She is the third concubine included by the Maharaja, who replaced Amina Begam. She is described as far less beautiful and cultured than the Maharani. Abhay wonders about his father's bad choice over his own graceful and attractive mother. So, the factor of beauty and physical appearance of a female was less important than her personal talent and attitude; the feministic principle of opposing objectifying women is seen through these characters even though they were purchased concubines. Minnie is an Anglo-Indian who has a romantic connection to the prince, Abhay, and his friend Tony Sykes. Although she belongs to a mixed race and heritage and was having an inferiority complex about her race, she is bold, independent in taking decisions, and pragmatic. She also stands as an example of the tenets of feminism.

In Manohar Malgonkar's *The Devil's Wind*, Kashi is the third wife of Nana Saheb, who is a female character who challenges the oppression faced by women in a patriarchal society. Due to a family curse that states any married wife with whom Nana Saheb consummates will die. Although Kashi is brought in to be a wife to Nana Saheb for the purpose of producing a successor, the marriage is never physically consummated due to the fear of a curse. So, Kashi remains a virgin during her time together with Nana Saheb. After the failed 1857 revolt against the British, Nana Saheb flees to Nepal, taking Kashi and others with him. In the Nepalese court, Kashi boldly accepts to be a mistress to Nepali King Rana Jung Bahadur, who accepts to give refuge to Nana Saheb, Kashi and his son born to Eliza.

Kashi was submissive, tolerant, obedient, and admissible to any of Nana Saheb's orders. She had even accepted to perform the ritual of widowhood when Nana Saheb feigned a suicide by attaining 'jal-samadhi' by drowning in the Ganges River in order to escape from the British. When she discloses the proposal of Jung Bahadur to be his mistress, to Nana Saheb;

"I want to be a woman, not merely a repressed freak. I want to live, to become a mother, to experience physical love, violent, abandoned. I want to be in the glitter of a great king's court, not in a

hermitage. I'm past twenty and what else was there for me but the prospect of lifelong abstinence, to die before I ever learned to live? And, above all, I did not want to be the cause of my husband's death. Don't you see, my lord, that I am doing this as much for you as for myself? . . ." (*The Devil's Wind*, pp. 259, 260)

We come across the ideals of feminism expressed in these powerful words of Kashi.

In Manohar Malgonkar's *Cactus Country*, the main female character is Wahida Pirzada, a young Bengali woman, a daughter of Major Pirzada and his wife from a royal lineage. She has a deep resentment towards the West Pakistani army for their brutal actions against her people, which included killing her professors and raping her fellow students in the middle of the 1971 war between East and West Pakistan. This shows her support for feminist ideals. Initially hostile toward Aslam because he is a West Pakistan army officer, she treats him courteously while he is a prisoner in her mansion, and they fall in love. Wahida is depicted as a complex, modern, and spirited character. In *Bandicoot Run*, the women act as symbolic figures representing the clash between old traditions and new, post-colonial values. They are not confined to domestic roles and show a willingness to break conventions. In Malgonkar's *Spy in Amber*, Pem-pem Kachin is portrayed as a typical dangerous woman, a Chinese agent who uses guns as well as her own attraction as a weapon against her enemies! Malgonkar's novels often include such female characters who defy convention in their quest for self-realisation and uphold the tenets of feminism.

Almost all Malgonkar's women valued the 'love and respect' they expected from their men on par with morality. When they are deprived of the true love which they appreciate most, their life becomes less charming, and they fear that their real life will fade away as an unrealised dream. Some bold moves become more important and even more precious than traditional morality. So, Malgonkar's women characters are bold enough to go beyond the social boundaries when the need arises.

However, they may be faulty Malgonkar's heroines, are always true to themselves. They are individuals of flesh and blood. Although they have the

common characteristic of being highly individualistic, they are all self-obsessed characters. In the search for their true identity, all of them rebel against traditions and conventions, unstoppable by any obstacles. They may or may not be unusual, but they definitely are realistic. Their reactions to situations can be considered naturally feminist, especially when viewed in the post-colonial setting.

A careful analysis of all these women characters of Malgonkar reveals a beautiful sentiment that women can seek justice and strive for happiness, and they need not be tradition-bound when their own mental welfare is at risk. They have a right to happiness as a human being, immaterial if she is a Maharani or a prostitute like Mumtaz. In fact, Malgonkar is never critical about any of his characters, not even the promiscuous Margot. He leaves the readers to judge their actions. Maybe his heroines are far too progressive and revolutionary, but their attitude is true and uninhibited. They want to depend upon men, who ignite the spark of their life, adventure, and passion in their hearts and who are expected to lead them to fulfilment. All of them think that this fulfilment is an honour to their femininity. Thus, despite Malgonkar's reputation for exploring masculine themes, his portrayal of female characters often contains feminist undertones. He depicts women with an internal conflict who challenge patriarchal norms and seek fulfilment beyond the societal expectations.

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