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## From Silence to Strength: A Feminist Exploration of Manohar Malgonkar's Fictional World

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### ABSTRACT

Manohar Malgonkar is widely acclaimed as a prominent Indian novelist whose works have made a significant impact on the literary landscape. Manohar Malgonkar, known for his versatility as a novelist, also demonstrated a keen awareness and exploration of feminist consciousness in his works. While not exclusively focused on feminist themes, his writings reflect a deep understanding of gender dynamics, the struggles faced by women, and their quest for empowerment and equality within the Indian societal context. My present paper will try to dig out the hidden area of various facts and factors, prejudices and predilections of the feminine sense and sensibility through the female protagonists of Malgonkar who despite innumerable challenges exhibit their female acumen and search for their distinct goal of liberation.

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The advent of women's education in India has catalyzed a profound transformation in the individual consciousness and economic independence of women, allowing them to discover their true identities within society. Women have begun to critically examine themselves, realizing how they have been emotionally exploited by men under the pretense of noble ideals like sacrifice and stoic suffering, be it as a beloved, wife, mother, or daughter. The traditional depiction of women solely as archetypes of inspiration, generosity, compassion, and patience, such as Sita or Savitri, no longer holds sway over them. In the realm of Indian-English fiction, particularly during the post-Independence Era, the socio-political and historical emergence of women has been keenly explored. Consequently, the principles of feminist consciousness have permeated various aspects of society. However, it is within Indian-English

fiction that the credibility of these ideas has been vigorously established. Veena Noble Dass opines in this connection:

*Indian English fiction, poetry and drama are replete with the male confrontation, problems of adolescence, and coming of age, with special reference to women, explicit and latent pleadings for equality, liberty and self-preservation. (Feminism and Literature-12)*

A greater number of Indian English novelists have taken up to delineate and exhibit the dimensions of female potential such as Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, etc. The exploration of tormented womanhood is not limited to female writers, male writers like Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Manohar Malgoankar also delve into this theme. My present paper intends to explore the feminist consciousness in the novels of Manohar Malgonkar. Malgonkar in line with changing societal dynamics, portrays his female characters who undergo remarkable transformations. They engage in introspection, rebel against patriarchal authority, and miraculously emerge from prolonged subjugation and profound depths of adversity.

Although Malgonkar's reputation as a novelist rests on his embodiment of masculine chivalry, it is worth noting that his feminist sensibilities remain unassailable, making him a remarkable advocate for gender equality. Malgonkar's portrayal of female characters goes beyond conventional stereotypes, showcasing their strength, resilience, and agency. He provides nuanced depictions of women who navigate societal expectations, challenge patriarchal norms, and strive for self-realization. These characters undergo personal growth, engage in self-reflection, and assert their individuality, effectively shedding light on the evolving roles of women in Indian society.

It would be quite interesting and stimulating to study the novels of Manohar Malgonkar who is the forerunner of masculine chivalry to explore the diversity of suppression of feminine sensibility of his female protagonists and their sustained effort to reach out for their self-realization and fulfillment. By portraying the internal conflicts and external challenges faced by his female characters, Malgonkar offers a nuanced exploration of feminist consciousness. Furthermore, Malgonkar's works often provide social commentary on issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and the limitations imposed on women's education and employment opportunities. As Y. Dayanand remarks, "The study of these women may at best offer valuable hints about the prevailing social attitude towards women and perhaps about the personal attitude of the author himself." (*Manohar Malgonkar-60*)

Malgonkar, through his diverse and multidimensional female characters like Maharani in *The Princes*, Sundari in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Ruby, Miranda in *Combat of Shadows*, and Kashi in *The Devil's Wind*, offers insights into the challenges faced by women, their resilience, and their pursuit of empowerment within a complex societal framework. However, it is not the heroes that captivate his attention, but rather the female characters he creates. These women emerge from various social backgrounds, diverse statuses, and even different nations. Nevertheless, primarily, they are simply human beings—individuals characterized by an intense and fiery nature.

Malgonkar's novels primarily aim to depict socio-political satire, but he also demonstrates remarkable skill in portraying the relentless philandering of his male characters. These individuals are completely consumed by their insatiable pursuit of sexual passion, which leads to the downfall of their marriages and personal lives. As a consequence, their spouses rebel against them, seeking fulfillment of their own sexual desires with other men. In *The Princes*, the character of the Maharani is portrayed as a deeply sorrowful woman, enduring an extraordinary amount of agony. The narrator, Abhay, holds strong disapproval of his mother's decision to elope with Abdulla Jan, yet he also comprehends the predicament she faced, leading to her choice. He narrates the account of Maharani's separation from her husband, "She wants to go where there will be affection—yes, physical love, violent and abandoned—before there is the final ebbing away of desires, before the fear of old age, before the creeping hand of death." (*The Princes* -163)

In the face of enduring relentless suffering caused by the Maharaja's unfaithfulness, when Maharani realized that all her dreams had been shattered, a profound sense of exasperation consumed her. She rebelled against her role as a mere symbol of status and chose to relinquish her title as Maharani. Consequently, she embarked on a path of transformation, taking a Muslim lover named Abdulla Jan, converting her religion, relinquishing her devoted worship of gods and goddesses, and making the decision to accompany him to Pakistan. In his presence, she discovers true fulfillment both as a wife and as a woman. However, when her son boldly labels her as a prostitute, she retorts -

*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 -335)*

It is unfortunate to notice the anguish and agony of a woman who has been condemned to the shadows of isolation. When Abhay rebuked and called her a “bitch”, she answered very proudly and patiently:

*I may be bitch, but I am no longer a shameless woman of the streets, I was one, all these years when I lived with a man in sin. But remember I had been abandoned by my husband. I was a discarded woman... It was like 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 Maharani in darkness... never knowing what it was to be a complete woman. ( The Princes-319-320)*

Through his astute artistry, Malgonkar skilfully portrays the orthodox Maharani's ability to renounce her royal status, embrace the vibrant nightlife, and even convert her religion without any remorse. This depiction highlights the fundamental humanity of a queen, who, like anyone else, possesses the capacity for personal transformation. Within the commanding persona of Maharani, the novelist skilfully portrays the arduous journey of a woman yearning to discover her own unique identity, bravely challenging the prevailing myth of male superiority that seeks to confine her to a purposeless existence. Dr. Krishna Sharma aptly observes:

*She defies the traditional roles and norms of morality set for a woman.... she finds fulfillment in stepping out of the meaningless relationship.... she is a rebellious woman who does not hesitate to break the taboo-ridden society and change her religion or elope with an ordinary man of lower status. (Protest on Post -Independence Indian English Fiction-164)*

*A Bend in the Ganges*, the most celebrated novel of Malgonkar offers a poignant and thought-provoking exploration of India's complex social and political landscape during the turbulent era of the country's struggle for independence. Set against the backdrop of the Ganges River, the novel delves into the lives of its diverse characters and their intersecting paths as they navigate through the challenges of colonial rule, religious tensions, and personal desires. As Rituparna Roy says, “This novel is not just one of the most popular novels written on the Partition, but it is also one of the best-known texts in the whole canon of Indian English Fiction.” (*South-Asian Partition Fiction in English- 47*)

In *Bend of the Ganges* Sundari, a female protagonist emerges as a compelling figure, epitomizing resilience, self-discovery, and societal rebellion. Sundari, a young woman from a conservative background, embarks on a transformative journey that challenges traditional gender norms and societal expectations. She is the daughter of a great magnate Dewan Bahadur Tekchand and married with Gopal Chandidar, a young man who has received a Western education. However, Gopal's exposure to Western culture has had a detrimental influence on his perception of marriage. He views it as a convenient arrangement devoid of genuine affection and trust, thus maintaining a sexual relationship with his girlfriend, Malini, even after tying the knot with Sundari.

When Sundari reaches a point of intense conflict with her husband, she takes the bold step of breaking away from Gopal and seeks solace in the love of Gian. However, her world shatters when her brother Debi Dayal reveals that Gian, whom she has grown fond of, played a pivotal role in Debi's unjust imprisonment in the Andaman Jail. This revelation leaves Sundari deeply disillusioned and heartbroken. Throughout the novel Sundari, experiences profound loss, as she is separated from her beloved Debi, deceived by Gopal and Gian, and ultimately, tragically loses her parents. However, Sundari displays immense courage in the face of adversity. What sets Sundari apart is her refusal to conform to traditional Indian ideals such as "Pativrata" (the devoted wife) and "Sati-Savitri" (the virtuous and self-sacrificing woman). She fearlessly asserts her own voice and advocates for her own needs and desires. Sundari challenges the societal parameters imposed upon women and refuses to be silenced.

Determined to deliver a fitting retribution for their treachery, Sundari resolves to teach both Gian and Gopal a profound lesson they won't forget. Sundari meticulously plots her revenge, scheming to manipulate Gian to fulfill her vengeful desires. With calculated intent, she extends an invitation to Gian, enticing him to accompany her to the beach. Once there, she deftly orchestrates a clever ruse, carefully reconstructing the exact scene of passionate intimacy she had once witnessed through Gopal's binoculars, six years prior, between Malini and Gopal on the shores of Juhu Beach. Gopal saw Sundari and Gian in the same compromising position from the self-same telescope which was already kept pre-adjusted by Sundari for Gopal to observe and get dreadfully scandalized. Sundari skilfully compelled her husband to confront the unsettling reality that she had no hesitation about indulging in wanton behavior with a stranger as a means of seeking revenge. Once she was certain that Gopal had witnessed this provocative display of affection, Sundari fearlessly confided in Gian, expressing her deep-seated grievances, "One day we returned from our honeymoon, my husband lay here, yes, exactly here, with a

low woman. That was six years ago. Ever since I have been waiting to avenge myself. Today I have succeeded.” (A *Bend in the Ganges*-324)

Similarly, Malgonkar’s other novel *Combat of Shadows* also serves as a powerful exploration of feminist ideals. Through the character of Ruby Miranda, the author skilfully explores the complexities of gender dynamics and empowers readers with a profound understanding of women’s experiences and struggles. Miranda cherished an ambition of marrying an Englishman Henry Winton, the manager of a Tea Company in Assam. Winton comes in contact with Miranda and exploits her sexually because of her inordinate and obsessive ambition of marrying him. But Henry, despite exploiting her sexually, married an English girl, Jean, and left Miranda to suffer in isolation and now, “she hated herself just as bitterly for her own complete dependence on him.” ( *Combat of Shadows*-345)

Her delicate oriental feminine sensibility suffers a severe blow due to Henry’s disgraceful conduct, as he shamelessly offers her to sustain their sexual relationship even after his marriage with Jean. Filled with vengeance, she vows to punish him, “o, you brute! you white swine! I hate you. I hate you.... I will kill you for this, Henry Winton.... no matter how long it takes, I shall kill you for what you have done and what you have said.” ( *Combat of Shadows*-150-151))

Both the women Ruby Miranda and Jean have been treated as merely a sex commodity to satisfy the urges of Henry. Miranda and Jean demanded for their respective equitable share of Winton’s worldly goods, but he refused it to both, they decided to take their revenge in their own way. Both of them defy societal expectations and challenge traditional gender norms with their unwavering strength and resilience. Jean shifted her attention of love from Winton to his rival Eddie Trever. Miranda conspired to burn Winton alive in the game cottage. G. S. Amur aptly observed, “The story of Winton’s relationship with Ruby is one of betrayal—betrayal of passion through fear.” ( *Manohar Malgonkar*-70)

*The Devil’s Wind* stands as another exceptional work by Malgonkar, where feminist consciousness is brilliantly interwoven into the portrayal of Kashi’s character. Her journey reflects the struggle for autonomy, the quest for self-realization, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of societal constraint. Kashi, being Nana’s third wife, finds herself in an unusual circumstance. The first two wives tragically perished before their marriages could be consummated, leaving Kashi as a virgin throughout her time with Nana. This peculiar situation arises from a strange family curse, which dictates that, “if ever a marriage is consummated the wife shall die, not a single woman can live to bear his rightful child.” ( *The Devil’s Wind*-17)

Aware of Kashi's predicament, Nana camouflages his guilt by attributing her supposed death to the superstitious curse. However, Kashi cannot suppress her innate femininity indefinitely, especially in a relationship devoid of fulfillment. Therefore, she willingly embraces the role of mistress to Rana Jung Bahadur, the Prime Minister of Nepal, when Nana seeks refuge there to escape arrest and punishment. But she could no longer suppress her feminine instincts under the guise of the futile relationship and willingly accepted to become the mistress of Rana Jung Bahadur, the Prime Minister of Nepal, when Nana took refuge in Nepal to escape from arrest and punishment. The natural physical instincts that she kept so long suppressed revolted against her own spiritual sanity and she cries out spontaneously:

*I want to be a woman, not merely a repressed freak. I want to live, to become a mother, to experience physical love, violence, abandoned. I want to be in the great king's court, not in a hermitage. I am 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. (The Devil's Wind-259)*

Malgonkar deftly emphasizes Kashi's ascendancy over Nana, portraying her in a transformative light. In this new incarnation, she devises a plan to achieve two goals simultaneously - to savor the pleasures of physical intimacy and experience a sense of wholeness as a woman, while also safeguarding her husband's life. When Nana was arrested in the hands of the British, Kashi was demanded by the Prime Minister Rana Jung Bahadur to save the life of Nana in a bargain and she surrenders herself to save the life of her husband. When Nana accused her, with audacity, she fearlessly confesses to him, "By rejecting me as your wife, you saved my life. God has given it to me to do you the same service by rejecting you as my husband." (*The Devil's Wind-260*)

Furthermore, Kashi exhibits a remarkable display of feminine acumen and uncommon insight as she embraces the illegitimate child of Eliza, a child conceived through a traumatic act of rape. Thus, despite sufferings throughout her life under the oppressing and subjugating male authority of society, Kashi serves as a powerful representation of resilience and the pursuit of personal liberation within a restrictive and patriarchal context.

Therefore, through the vivid depiction found within his novels, Malgonkar effectively captures the desires, dreams, conflicts, and sufferings of his female protagonists, delving into their prejudices, preferences, and their growing determination to assert their unique identities and individuality.

Malgonkar's heroines, despite their flaws, are vivid and realistic individuals. They share the defining trait of fierce individualism, embodying self-assured characters who remain true to themselves. Their collective act of rebellion against traditions and conventions is a testament to their strength and determination.

Through a meticulous examination of Malgonkar's female characters, a profound sentiment emerges that women have the capacity to pursue justice and strive for happiness without being bound by tradition when their mental well-being is at stake. They possess the inherent right to pursue happiness as equals, for they too are human beings deserving of fulfillment. In conclusion, while Manohar Malgonkar may not be exclusively known as a writer of feminist literature, his novels exhibit a deep understanding and exploration of feminist consciousness. By weaving feminist themes into his narratives, Malgonkar contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and advocates for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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