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The concept of racial superiority in Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows*

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This research paper is a study of the pride and prejudice of the ruling Britishers against the Indians and the glimpses of Indian politicians who are detrimental to the progress and prosperity of India due to their opportunistic nationalism. It projects the story of the British men who stayed in India for a long time left no stone unturned for vulgarizing the Indians through different means. The story of the novel *Combat of Shadows* revolves round the central figure Henry Winton, the British Plantation Manager of the Brindian Tea Company. In spite of the difference in race and nationality, Henry Winton is well-intentioned; but soon, he finds himself in a demoralising and dehumanising situation which leads him towards corruption and moral degeneration. For the purpose of giving moral pills, Malgonkar chooses Henry Winton who has nothing to do with morals and code of conduct on which life should be based. He does what he likes and remains lost in the jungle of sensual pleasure. By showing him burning alive in a game-cottage, the author form the lessons in an appalling way which makes one keep away from the path trodden by persons like Henry Winton.

Key words: Detrimental, opportunistic, vulgarizing, dehumanising, race and nationality.

INTRODUCTION

Manohar Malgonkar was one of the prominent Indo-English novelists. Like Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and others, he was a prolific and voluminous writer. He was one of those few Indo-Anglian novelists who show the hollowness of the concept of racial superiority in the bigger context of social life.

So far as the ethical value is concerned, *Combat of Shadows* comes first from the hand of Manohar Malgonkar as a novelist. It takes an epigraph from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, verse 27, and runs into 35 chapters in all. Bhabani Bhattacharya observes, *Combat of Shadows* as "a humble attempt to delineate human nature in the light of Srimadvagavadagita" (1984: 162).

SUMMARY

In *Combat of Shadows* the concept of racial superiority was often extended by the British for the continuation of

the British rule in India. Henry Winton is blind with racial arrogance and represents the British tendency of looking down upon the Indians. Malgonkar presents him as a true representative of the British race in an ironical way. Henry Winton who is proud and conscious of his racial superiority, often lapses into cowardice. He pales into insignificance before the 'Combat of Shadows.' Amur says about Winton's story, "It culminates in the hero's apocalyptic realization of the 'moment of truth'" (1973: 39).

Henry Winton is one of the British Managers of the Brindian Tea Company having his headquarters at Silent Hill. He is young and masculine. He has a strong enchantment towards hunting and shooting. He appears as a dominate figure, a man of power and a man of strong will. He came to India with the education of Public School in England. He brought with himself many vices as his failure as a dealer in used cars in his own country has already undermined his character. His main aim here was

to earn money and he was fearful of his failure.

Henry Winton, a British Plantation Manager, has developed a fondness for Ruby Miranda, a beautiful and bold Anglo-Indian girl, and is at once struck by her good looks. He is moved by his lust for her “eyes of the real Chandani Chowk whore, black and gold” (19). She is appointed as the Headmistress of the Silent Hill School by Winton because her beautiful face is the only recommendation against other candidates. He uses her as a mistress to break the loneliness and monotony of his plantation life in a remote corner of north-eastern Assam.

When Henry takes Ruby as a teacher in his school, he means to use her to gratify his sexual desire. He dwells on her physical charm. He sees her through his lustful eyes and reduces to an object of sex. He finds her as splendid in looks as in love making, if not so perfect in her accent and pronunciation. Whereas his colleagues mostly go for coolie women, Henry has shown himself as a man of taste in the choice of a mistress and he congratulates himself upon his choice.

As Henry wants to make a success of his career and as he places his career above everything else. Till he secures his career, he doesn't wish to get involved with a native woman, however beautiful she might be and however close she might be to his own race. He knows from his experiences of others that his career would be ruined if he failed to see “the thin line that divides fun from serious involvement,” as his boss Sir Jeffry Dart puts it (108). He longs for Ruby at night, but is formal and guarded in the daytime. His exclusive sexual interest is exposed when one finds him uncomfortable when her talk veers towards the subject of marriage.

During this early period, Henry does sometimes sincerely appreciate Ruby's qualities. If the idea of marriage comes to Henry's mind when he is in such an appreciative mood, Eddie's application for a job arouses his suspicion of her loyalty and he quickly brushes the thought of marriage aside. Being a man of pride, he cannot bear to have a Eurasian as a rival in love and at once, his attitude towards Ruby Miranda changes.

We see Henry's conceit and pride in his reactions to Ruby's angry outbursts at the meeting which takes place in his bungalow after he comes back from England, married. He was shocked to realize that she had greater expectations. Though Henry later protests against Jean's accusation that he did not marry Ruby because of his sense of racial superiority, he cannot really be said to be free from racial arrogance. Eddie Trevors is, it may be conceded, a bounder, but the degree of revulsion the Eurasian arouses in Henry cannot be explained away wholly in terms of common human pride. Jean Walters, whom Henry marries, had an English lover, but this does not hurt Henry so much. The way he reflects upon his relationship with Ruby during this clearly shows that his pride comes from a sense of racial superiority.

Unfortunately, Ruby is playing a game, the rules of which Henry does not know. She accepts the offer of the

teaching job on Henry's plantation with the sole aim of winning and marrying the white man, who is “a passport to the dream-world of Eurasian woman-hood” (151). Initially Ruby's mother is against her taking the job and she advises her daughter, “don't go running after English men; they don't marry, not the pucca ones” (99). Eddie Trevors, her lover, warns her, “the bloody English swine will give you a brat” (102). Despite the advice and warnings from well-meaning people, Ruby takes up the appointment and pursues her aim with single-minded devotion.

Like most of her fellow Anglo-Indians, Ruby is most unhappy with her Indian connection and she wants to become pure and whole by marriage with a white man. There are no words, the author writes, to describe the secret unspoken dream of her life, the dream of Anglo-India:

She could never have explained to Henry Winton the throbbing, compulsive craving of Anglo-India to seek living Kinship with the West; the desperate daily struggle of separation and alignment, the tight clutching of the tenuous, often imaginary strands of relationships with the sahib's, the constant vigilance against further assimilation with the smothering, enveloping people of the Indian-soil. Above all, she could never have laid bare to any outsider her own personal dream of becoming someday sahib's lady, going into the reserved, all white clubs with her head held high, escorted by an Englishman without the slightest trace of coloured blood; of bearing blue-eyed, flaxen-haired children, of going to London for a dizzy round of the town and gaze at the King himself; and then of settling down in a cool, antiseptic, wholly English suburb and washing away the contamination of India and Tinapur. No effort was too much for the fulfillment of that constant, aching dream, no sacrifice too great—not even the sacrifice of the love of a man like Eddie Trevor (103).

Not Until Henry has been humbled by the slow discovery of his wife's disloyalty was he able to love Ruby. Humbled and chastened by his tragic experience of a loveless married life, he turns to Ruby, setting aside his earlier fear, pride, and racial prejudice. He views Ruby from a different angle now. To his great surprise and happiness, Henry finds that Ruby has learnt to speak English in the real BBC style. He invites Ruby to the game cottage in the forest, where he decides to propose to her.

Meanwhile, Ruby has taken her frustration in love as a further confirmation of the general Anglo-Indian belief that there is nothing but sorrow and disappointment in their seeking kinship with the white race, and she will, therefore, not be taken in by Henry's advances now. She is blinded by racial hatred and she cannot naturally see the change that has taken place in Henry's outlook. Concealing her aversion for him behind her smile, gestures, and sexual appeal, she accepts his invitation to

spend the night with him in the game cottage. Though Ruby has been encouraging his advances, she has other plans in mind. With the help of a group of a people who bear grudges against Henry for one reason or other, Ruby has the game cottage set on fire, and Henry is killed in the fire. Dr. Ashok Kumar Sharma observes:

His prejudice and envy blurs his insight and self-realisation fails to save him from the fire of hell (1995:26).

Another craze for Winton is to join the military commission in the ensuing course at Belgaum, but this also remains unfulfilled. His competitor in love, Eddie, gets the commission and is to join the Academy within two weeks before he gets killed by the bumptious elephant, but Winton's wait without hope for a call up never materialises. For this, too, he envies Eddie, and subtly plots his murder. The only natural justice for him is what he meets with at the hands of his own people at the close of the novel. It shows his identity in which he appears to be self centered and immoral. For a long time he remains indulged in sensual pleasure that makes him morally weak. Moreover, his defeat as a hunter gives him a clear trait of corruption in his character.

Philosophically, the novelist stands balanced and rational in his analysis of the forces—sex, money and fame—that make the mare go, he appears to be indignant against the Indian politicians. Malgonkar does not experience even a little bit of elation while depicting Indian reformer leaders. Kai Nicholson observes:

There is a certain amount of caricature on the politician's personality buildup which Malgonkar utilizes to belittle him (1972: 37).

The novel presents several other sad racial encounters and the pitiable consequences of those encounters. Though the amorous story of Jean and Eddie is sketchily presented from the outside, it seems as though racial considerations do not stand in the way of their love. However, marriage does not come through even in this case, as Henry cunningly sets Eddie after a rogue elephant with dud cartridges and sends him to his death. Eddie is one of the large number of products of illicit sex and love, and he dies not knowing that his real father is no other than Sir Jeffrey Dart, the Resident Director, the man who views with great displeasure his officers getting involved with native women. When Eddie's mother was big with the child of Sir Jeffrey, he quietly got her married off to his watchman. The British officers on the plantation use without scruple coolie women to satisfy their sex, and if any complication like pregnancy arises, they give them a couple of hundred rupees to clear their conscience.

Very skillfully, Malgonkar appears to show that no race can claim to be in the strict adherence to the morality. Winton believes that the white skin is superior to that dark in strict adherence to this illusion has long nourished his

sense of superiority. And this illusion of superiority is exploded here. It was too late when he realizes that he has real love in her heart for Ruby Miranda. Perhaps, his failure in search of his moral identify with his own race compels him to feel deep involvement with Ruby:

His whole system craved for her with a fierce insistence, to crush her into his arms, to feel the hardness of her taut breasts, the nipples burning patches of fire into his chest to smother her whole smooth honey coloured body with kisses became an urgent, almost an insane longing. From nowhere at all, an intense, burning thirst had sprung up, it was both physical and emotional, and quite irrepressible. It was the sort of longing that people commit murders for, he told himself (232).

He also feels and knows what led him to betray this passion:

. . . Henry knew within himself that he had renounced her love not because he did not reciprocate it, nor even because it was not the love of a white woman, as Jean has taunted him, but through fear, because Sudden dart had warned him not to get involved with her; fear that his career would have ended he had carried on as he was doing (276-77).

To read this novel as a story of racial encounter is not away from reality. But some critics have a view that the end of the novel complicates the matter G. S. Amur says:

What makes 'Combat of Shadows' superior to Bhowani Junction is the modernity of its theme and artistic integrity with which it is worked out in fictional terms. It is true that Malgonkar's predilection for his revenge theme which cuts across his moral discrimination as in the final episode of the novel where sudden Pasupati and Ruby are united in their hatred of Winton, confuses his statement on the racial situation and makes it less valuable than that of, say, Kipling or Forster, but his treatment of the main theme, the moral disintegrating of a European on foreign soil, has no parallel outside Conrad. In 'Combat of Shadows' Malgonkar perfected not only his art of story-telling but also the tools moral analysis which he was to put greater use in the later novels (1973: 76).

To interpret *Combat of Shadows* as a valid comment on the racial situation is to put more weight on it than it can bear. In fact, the final episode does not confuse the statement on the racial situation. It merely proves that the basic passions of men are the same in spite of their racial differences. Moreover, the author wants to say that the general tendency of all the men is to hate the bad and love the good. Only on this ground the characters of the different races unite in wreaking vengeance against the corrupt and dishonest Winton. Still further the novelist wants to suggest that a man who is morally corrupt

cannot be accepted by the society even when it is made of various races.

CONCLUSION

This brief analysis of the novel *Combat of Shadows* shows that Manohar Malgonkar is a writer with purpose—and the purpose is to enlighten the mind and broaden the heart of the reader with the exposition of moral values without which the entire world appears to be wasteland even to T. S. Eliot (1990) a great modern poet and critic. Eliot writes in his “*The Waste Land*:

*You cannot, say or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water, only
There is no shadow under this red rock (1990: 72).*

For the purpose of giving moral pills the novelist in this novel chooses a weak, lecher and dishonest character, Henry Winton who has nothing to do with morals and code of conduct on which life should be based. He does what he likes and remains lost in the jungle of sensual pleasure. By showing him burning alive in a game-cottage, the author forms the lessons in an appalling way which makes one keep away from the path trodden by persons like Henry Winton. From moralistic point of view

this novel is the most philosophical one. It is not to be inferred that he ignores the claims of art for the celebration of moral values. The novelist’s craftsmanship lies in weaving morals in the fabric of the novels.

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