



Quest for heroic ideals in the novels of Manohar Malgonkar

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Abstract

Manohar Malgonkar's depiction of the immediate socio-political scenario is marked by exasperation at the crippling creed which fetters people. His protagonists having heroic ideals emerge to stem the rot. What intrigues him is the Kshatriya prince and the soldiers with codes of honour. These are obvious inputs in the Malgonkar code of heroship, which encompasses a number of values and attitudes. Adherence to this code he feels, is essential for sustaining human relationships and social institutions.

Keywords: Manohar Malgonkar, socio-political

Introduction

There is little doubt that as an important figure in Indian English fiction Manohar Malgonkar (1913-2010) has received a lot of critical acclaim, yet he merits to be assessed in new contexts. The development of Indian English fiction is traced through three phases – historical novels, novels of social and political realism and individual case studies. Malgonkar has absorbed well the gains of historical fiction and even though his novels belong to the second phase viz., the novels of social and political realism, they are as much authentic historically as they are socially and politically.

Manohar Malgonkar's depiction of the immediate socio-political scenario is marked by exasperation at the crippling creed which fetters people. His protagonists having heroic ideals emerge to stem the rot. Malgonkar does not stand for specific ideas or strategies in abstraction, but for the human definition of these. It is in men rather than in abstract institutions or values that he sees the ray of hope. He renders in all his novels the socio-political happenings in a human framework, intertwining the endeavors of the protagonists to realize themselves with the saga of the nation bestirring itself. Heroism and the importance of action get a place of prominence in his writings. What fascinates as well as intrigues him is the Kshatriya prince and the soldiers with codes of honour. These are obvious inputs in the Malgonkar code of heroship, which encompasses a number of values and attitudes. Some of these can be listed thus: loyalty, courage, justice, strength, skill, grace, steadfastness, camaraderie, an unflinching readiness to take responsibility, a stubborn, almost stupid refusal to bend under pressure, disdain for danger, commitment and so on. All these values are essentially conservative and traditional. Adherence to this code, Malgonkar feels, is essential for sustaining human relationships and social institutions. Malgonkar refers to these values as having emanated from the army code (an extension of a "school" code of honour) and the princely order (which had its unwritten code of honour).

Malgonkar's own career in the army wherefrom he retired as Lieutenant Colonel, his interest in Maratha history especially

in Shivaji and the Peshwas, his own involvement in the Indian socio-political scene and last but not least his concern with the sociology of faith in India are factors which lie legitimately at the back of Malgonkar's treatment of his heroes. These in a way acted as catalysts in precipitating his notion of heroship.

The protagonist in *Distant Drum*, Lt. Col. Kiran Garud symbolises all the values associated with the code. All other positive characters in the novel viz., Abdul Jamal, Bertie Howard and Ropey Booker adhere to this manly code. The anti-thesis is projected through the negative characters like Lala Vishnu Saran Dev, Rawal Singh, Kamal Kant and Shantilal who have no respect for the complex and delicate code of honour. The specific component of Malgonkar's code highlighted in the novel is camaraderie in its diverse dimensions-personal and political. All the positive characters in the novel vouch incontrovertibly for personal ties even if it involves the breach of pragmatic norms of political or rational behaviour.

Combat of Shadows is an enunciation of the code indirectly through the portrayal of the unheroic hero, Henry Winton, who fails miserably and whose life is a tale unredeemed by any glimmer of virtuous light precisely because he conspicuously lacks all the components of a code hero. His violent death symbolises the price of fear, lust, betrayal and murder. Thus by implication facilitates the impression, how indispensable the code values are for men in offices of importance.

The Princes is a forceful reiteration of familiar values as Malgonkar finds the princely order, besides the army, a most fertile ground for the sustenance and growth of the values in his code. Abhay, the protagonist and his father, the king, carry the mantle of heroship. They bring out the commitment of Malgonkar's heroes to the values of the code — family loyalty, respect for time bound customs and traditions, love, honour, sense of history, trust, courage and a sense of self-respect. The particular trait of the Malgonkar hero highlighted here is justice in a Sophoclean sense of the term. The anti-thesis is projected through Kanakchand, the faithless beneficiary, the ungrateful subject, the minister, the leader

who has been shown as cowardly, cunning, mean and immoderate to highlight the moral degradation that had become the bane of the political and social life of free India.

A Bend in the Ganges deals with the fluctuating fortunes of the two heroes, viz., Debidayal and Gian Talwar, chosen from different social backgrounds, presented as two different types, juxtaposing two - different ideologies of *himsa* and *ahimsa* respectively. The Malgonkar code of hero ship is scrutinised threadbare in the absorbing drama woven around these characters. Besides bravery, loyalty, commitment and justice in this novel, we have a set of fresh attributes like love, sacrifice, tolerance and purposeful action, added to the Malgonkar code of values.

The later novels, i.e., The Devil's Wind, The Garland Keepers and Cactus Country reveal other facets of the code values by reinforcing them in new contexts and situations. In The Devil's Wind, the focus is on the attributes of Nana Saheb and Malgonkar's code of heroship gets reflected through the values of friendship, commitment, humanitarianism, broadmindedness and patriotism. The Garland Keepers highlights through the portrayal of characters like Om Prakash Agarwal, Visram Lal, A.B. Chopra and Avinash Batra values like commitment to a noble cause, fearlessness in the pursuit of one's duty, purposive action, etc. in the recent socio-political context of the infamous Emergency in the country. In Cactus Country, the protagonist, Aslam Chisti brings into play all the values enshrined in the Malgonkar code in the entirely new context of the hegemonistic designs of the Pakistani junta over East Bengal, throwing new light on these values, legitimizing them in the process.

Malgonkar's heroes thus are depicted as incorporating a set of values which constitute an indirect attack on the post-independence conduct of the people and the polity in India.

His heroes, endowed with a set of desirable attributes, not merely diagnose the Indian socio-political reality but also train a blaze out of the impasse. This makes these novels a significant milestone in the evolution and blossoming of socially meaningful Indian English fiction.

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