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**Novel as Contemporary Indian History -
A Glimpse of Works by Manohar Malgonkar,
His Contemporaries, and Precursors**

Mayur Chhikara, Ph.D.

Abstract

Contemporary politics, religion, philosophy and sociology contribute primarily to the conceptual content of literature. In Indian literature also, Contemporary history has been used as an important theme explicitly or implicitly by almost all the Indian writers in their works. It has been as an important plot ingredient in their novels. Likewise, most of the novels written in India have been influenced by contemporary history.

This paper analyzes influence of history on the works of Manohar Malgonkar in particular, his contemporaries, and precursors.

Literature, especially novel as a literary form is inextricably linked up with the environment in which it is written. It is a social activity. Novel has its foundations in economic, political, social, philosophic and religious patterns of time. The whole environment as such has a vital role to play in the making of literature especially novel.

Shamota comments:

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The soil which nurtures artistic talent is the culture of the people, the tastes, spiritual demands and life of the artist's contemporaries. In other words, the artist is only the co-author of a magnificent creation known as the culture of the people. (*Shamota 106-7*)

Lawrence regards, novel a very vital form of creative art, as it is the "only form of art or science" which focuses on the living man in his "entirety" (*Lawrence 85*). Politics, religion, philosophy and sociology contribute primarily to the conceptual content of literature. The novelist is supposed to embody and reflect the true picture of society of what he is a keen observer.

Henry Fielding incorporated in English novel a significant streak of socio-political concern. This streak of socio-political concern, has since then, struck deep roots and produced many great works of genius.

Gradually novel found acceptance as an adequate medium of expression to withstand the demands of time; where the majority of the problems raised in bristling multitude by contemporary social and political developments could be discussed, analyzed and interpreted. Writers of the coming generations kept on following the same mode of projection of socio-political issues and emotions.

Indo-Anglian fiction is an outcome of its contemporary history though exception. Caudwell in his essay "*On Romance and Realism*", brilliantly points out the socio-political roots of literary arts:

The traditions of art are not language traditions, but social traditions. Literary art therefore, has an essential feature- the use of associations gathered in shops, market places, friendly conversations, political speeches and quarrels. It is not surprising therefore; a literary art is conditioned at every step by social relation, fabricated by the necessity of human co-operation. (*Hymes 30*)

The Goal of This Paper

The present paper analyses the influence of history on the works of Manohar Malgonkar in particular, his contemporaries and precursors. Indian novels revealed the Indian character and Indian life from the very beginning of it. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* appeared in 1864 which was a romantic story of domestic life set in a Bengal village, advocating the virtues of renunciation over self love for the attainment of freedom from slavery.

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed a gradual growth of the fictional form. Some of the important writers in the beginning were K.K. Sinha, T. Rama Krishna and Jogender Singh et al. The socio-political ferment, along with the Gandhian influence, gave a new impetus to the growth of Indian English novel. Fictions were used as a means of arousing and fostering national pride.

S. Venkataramani and A.S.P. Ayyar made the first significant attempt to lionize the patriot who organized the masses at the cost of his life against landlordism and Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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foreign domination. Novels like *Kandan The Patriot* (1932) and *A Novel of New India in Making* (1932) are examples in this direction.

The Indo-Anglian fiction came to its own in the nineteen thirties and took up themes of immediate relevance viz., the colonial exploitation, the Indian freedom struggle, the Second World War (1939-45), Japanese air-raid, the August Revolution of 1942, the holocaust of communal riots, partition of India and other burning socio-political issues.

The Modern Indian Novel in English

The great blooming of the Indian novel in English came with the appearance of the “major trio” (Naik 15) viz., Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. It was the period which witnessed political, social and human causes as the genuine impulses for the novels. Most of the writers of this period could not escape both Gandhian influence and “Tagore’s magic spell” (Srivastava 223). Tagore (1950) asserts that “Socio-political consciousness in India precipitated and got moulded as nationalism under the direct impact of and as a reaction to English rule”.

History in the Novel

Fiction got a definite form and shape in the hands of these three novelists: Anand, Narayan and Rao and the important fact is that history is used in their novels. It is not merely the chronological interaction of facts but a graphic chronicle of a whole community in the political, social and spiritual spheres at a particular juncture of history which is represented. M.R. Anand’s novels are indignant socio-political criticism such as *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *The village* (1939) and *Across the Black Waters* (1941).

R.K. Narayan has kept away himself directly to political and historical problems. But through portrayal of middle class, he expressed the realism in his novels such as *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (1962) and *The English Teacher* (1964). Raja Rao’s novels convey a vision of India which is nothing else but spiritual image.

Manohar Malgonkar and Conservative Values

Manohar Malgonkar has followed his masters and he has written novels and expressed his ideas as Novels of History or Novel as History. History in his writing is not merely the chronological interaction of facts but a graphic chronicle of a community in the political, social and spiritual spheres at a particular juncture of history.

The exposure of social evils like poverty, social inequalities, injustice, capitalist or imperialist exploitations, the revolutionary – nationalist struggle for independence, the catastrophe of Hindu-Muslim discord and the tragedy of partition and the emergence of new India has been discussed in detail by Manohar Malgonkar. He is different from Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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other writers in one respect: in all his novels Malgonkar has shown a tendency to uphold conservative values in spite of the fact that he takes meticulous care to paint the unpalatable aspects of both the aristocrats and the middle classes in equal proportions, without an attempt to gloss over the dark aspects of the upper class.

Malgonkar has made a distinct contribution to Indian writing as “a down to earth teller of tales” (Singh 45). His own diverse experiences in the fields of big game hunting, civil service, army, business and politics have played an important role to help him catch the color of life especially of the upper strata. Malgonkar is very often described as “the John Masters of the Indo English Fiction” (Asnani 96) because of his affinity in matters of historic authenticity and gripping drama.

Authenticity of Events Used as Backgrounds

Malgonkar has used Indian themes, scenes, lives and events from the past and contemporary Indian history to write all his novels. A quick glance can easily mark the authenticity of historical events, used in various novels of Malgonkar. For example in *Distant Drum* (1960), Malgonkar attempts to present various facets of army life in India during the period of transition from the last years of the British regime to the beginning years of Congress rule.

The action of the novel covers the period from 1938 to 1950. In this novel, Malgonkar explores the relationship between the Indians and the Britishers. Malgonkar’s major novels reveal that the creative world is a world of violence, vengeance, passion, hatred and intrigue.

Recurrent evil and violence is the dominant theme of Malgonkar’s second novel *Combat of Shadows* (1962). The backdrop of the novel is the life and deteriorating conditions of the laborers in the tea estate of Assam. In this regard Malgonkar (1962) himself specifies the period and the locale before the story gets underway:

The action of this story takes place in the North-Eastern Assam, India. The Time: September 1938 to March 1940.

In the next novel *The Princes* (1963), Malgonkar has dealt with the political crisis that came with the merger of the princely states in India, after independence. *The Princes* depicts the phase of Indian national policy after independence regarding the Indian Princely states. A critic asserts:

“The novel deals with an exclusive phase of recent Indian History not so commonly dealt within Indo-Anglian fiction and nowhere taken up with such a sure touch as in Malgonkar.” (Bhatnagar 39)

A Bend in the Ganges (1964) is considered by many to be the greatest work of Malgonkar. Khuswant Singh considers this novel Malgonkar’s successful novel due to the number of great national events depicted in it. It is a sensational novel about the struggle for independence, the agony of the Partition and the pathos of post-Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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independence fumbling. The agony of Partition touched the writers. This novel also depicts the Gandhian era. i.e., 1920-1947, but this time he concentrated his attention on the role of terrorists as well, besides the followers of Mahatma Gandhi.

The next novel *The Devil's Wind* (1972) deals with the story of Nana Saheb, the controversial figure of the historic Sepoy Mutiny or the First War of Independence of 1857. In this, Malgonkar, in his endeavor to set the history in correct perspective, undertakes to absolve Nana of the false charges.

In an interview in *The Ellsworth American* (1970), Malgonkar says:

All history of India is written from the British view. Nana Saheb the leading figure of Mutiny has historically been treated as a villain. In my book... I treat him as a human being. I write of him as neither a patriot nor a villain but as a rather mixed up human being, like most of us are.

Bandicoot Run (1982), as its predecessors, has a significant base, a true verifiable historical substratum. This novel projects a more intense psychological perception and insight into evil. This is again a novel which deals with army life and national loyalty.

The Garland Keepers covers the Emergency period 1975-77 and all those activities that sought to curtail the freedom of Indians during that time, i.e., Press censorship, MISA, indiscriminate implementation of family planning and extra-constitutional authority of a caucus of sycophants, etc.. Although Malgonkar asserts in the Author's Note to the novel that the novel is not based on the emergency of 1975-77, but a fictional one, it is evident that it draws inspiration from these events and is intended to drive home subtly the lessons of emergency. The passing resemblance is ascribed to the fact that "*all fits of national epilepsy must show some common outward symptoms.*" (Malgonkar 1980)

Adapting History for Fictional Work

One can safely conclude on the basis of the in-depth analysis of the novels of Malgonkar that he, like his contemporaries and precursors, has broken fresh ground in adapting the fictional framework to accommodate an insightful analysis of contemporary Indian History. He has described the grass-root details of the sociological, cultural, economic and political history of his country.

Malgonkar's reliance on artistic modes of projection of his historical consciousness makes his novels examples *par excellence* of novel as history. Likewise other novelists have also incorporated history as an important plot ingredient in their novels. The present discussion shows that most of the novels written in India are contemporary historical novels.

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