

Human Bonds in Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princes*

ABNISH SINGH

ABSTRACT

Manohar Malgonkar, who has succeeded in carving out a significant place in Indian Fiction in English through the fresh and spontaneous depiction of Indian life and its value-system along with the socio-political and historical changes in the destiny of the nation, skillfully communicates multi-colors of human bonds– ‘man-woman, familial, racial and other social ones’ in his major novel *The Princes*. The novel presents the uneasy life and broken bonds of the people of an Indian state– Begwad, particularly the painful and problematic stories of the royal family and their unpleasant relations and struggles for survival, leading to the dissolution of the state due to new democratic reforms for the reconstruction of India after Independence.

Keywords: Human bonds, life and society, socio-political changes, struggle for survival, democracy, Independence.

I

Manohar Malgonkar (1913-2010), who has made significant contribution to Indian Writing in English by writing novels, thrillers, biographies, travelogues, books of Indian history, *scripts for Indian movies*, a period play and a large number of short-stories, and whose reputation rests mainly upon his five novels, namely: *Distant Drum* (1960), *Combat of Shadows* (1962), *The Princes* (1963), *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), and *The Devil's Wind* (1972), is deeply interested in the socio-political and historical aspects of Indian life of pre-Independence period in order to bring out the contours of the royal reign and its impacts

on men and women in his novel *The Princes*. He, therefore, through the magnificent depiction of princely life in an Indian state and the dissolution of the same due to the struggle for Independence in India, exhibits multi-colors of human bonds—“man-woman, familial, racial and other social ones” (Padmanabhan 10), as a form of conflict and a desire for survival, in the fictional world of *The Princes*.

II

The novel presents the stories of two princes— Hiroji and Abhayaraj. Hiroji, who is the king of Begwad, gets married with the Maharani. The marriage could not prove successful and, therefore, gradually turns into an act of compromise leading to unbound pain and sufferings to the Maharani. As a compromise the king gets an heir Abhay from the Maharani for making the crown safe and thereafter punctually goes to his mistresses and ignores his most beautiful wife. He ignores his wife for the reason that she is not only cursed and instrumental in bringing bad luck to him, but also less enchanting and appealing than his concubines are to him. Hence, the husband is happy and lost in gratifying his sexual desires and imperial whims and the nameless wife is destined to live in *purdah* in the manner of house arrest representing the multitudes of her class. The novelist truthfully displays the bad and sad state of Indian woman in the pre-Independence period: “Married... tied to a pair of feet... and afraid to raise her eyes to the face of her man...” (*The Princes* 163). This comment is in itself a big question mark on man and manners of the Indian society of pre-Independence Era.

Even if the Maharani has a son, she is unsatisfied with her role of a mother— her duties, motherly care and love for his son. At one occasion, she accepts it before his son: “One has to live with one’s own destiny. The world has to go on. It doesn’t run on happiness” (*The Princes* 161). At times, she also desires to set fire

to everything and shatter down the bonds of hollow society. But, she is helpless; she wastes her life, dying day by day, and one day she comes into contact with the palace officer and disentangles herself from the king causing great humiliation to the royal family. Therefore, the discord and breakup in the marital life of the king and the Maharani moulds the fabrics of the novel, culminating in the dissolution of the state at the end. Though it is the work of the democrats to make and execute the plan for the dissolution of the state, the unpleasant bond between the king and the Maharani along with the bonds between the father and the son and between the princes and the subjects also play the important role in the great downfall of Begwad state.

III

The king and the queen's marriage is a case of troubles and despair, whereas Abhay's marriage to Kamala becomes "a delightful experiment of two complete strangers discovering each other in all their intimacy" (*The Princes* 220). Abhay, who hated conventional marriages, ultimately finds that it has its own joys and rewards if one knows how to enjoy it. Therefore, he discovers a kind of fullness in the marital bonds making his wife pregnant. When Abhay finds that she is pregnant and therefore, unable to satisfy his carnal hunger, he thinks of some other women. And thus his youthful idealism disappears germinating a kind of notion that his heart is without love for his pregnant wife. As a result, he understands that carnal hunger is the bond that unites man and woman, and that love is only a way to satisfy it. This spurious discovery takes him to his female friends—Minnie and Zarina along with his sense of thankfulness to his gentle wife, who neither troubles him for his lustful activities in spite of knowing everything about him, nor fails to play her role of the ideal wife. Unlike his father, he gives her freedom to come out of her *purdah* and feel free in the advanced socio-cultural life at New Delhi.

The wheel of time moves and the conjugal bond between Abhay and Kamala improves and also matures. Being anxious of his welfare, Kamala does not want to leave him alone in his hard times after the disintegration of the state. She is wise enough to predict the unexpected behaviour of her husband in such circumstances and, therefore, gives him practical advice. Abhay, too, realizes her importance as a caring and lovely wife. Hence, he wants to communicate his love to her, but his wife stops him for a while and feels very happy and satisfied: "Sometimes it comes after many years... it cannot be there in the madness of youth...and then one day it hits you..." (*The Princes* 316).

Just like the bonds between men and women of the royal family, the novelist depicts Indo-British bonds in the army world of the novel. In the army, Punch Farren, Abhayraj, and Tony Sykes are close friends in spite of their different ranks, races and ruminations. Punch is a gentle Englishman who very well knows the importance of friendship and, therefore, blindly supports his friend Abhay, and not the Anglo-Indian Minnie; and when, at an occasion Abhay tries to give respect to Punch, who is his Adjutant, he stops him with his lovely remarks: "Sit down, damn you, and stop being so damned G.S" (*The Princes* 177). However, Abhay feels jealous of Tony Sykes, the *pucca* Satpura officer, as he is a contestant in the quest of getting Minnie's love. But when they first get together in Burma, Abhay's finds a change in his mind-set as he is delighted to see Tony as his close friend. Consequently, Abhay thinks highly of his professional brilliance apart from his other qualities: "Disdain for danger, a capacity for coolness under stress, an unfailing readiness to take responsibility, and above all, a stubborn, almost stupid refusal to bend under pressure" (*The Princes* 198). But, the unfortunate death of Tony greatly shocks Abhay and more troublesome is Minnie's letter which he finds in Tony's wallet after his death. This is the point where he comes to know about their competition in love. The revelation makes Abhay think of Tony's professional ethics, true friendship and real compassion.

IV

The story is also communicated through the bonds of the father and the son— Maharaj Hiroji and Abhayraj. Since the king, who is very rigid, has made a fixed time table for the prince for meeting his parents, Abhayraj always craves to get parental love and care, though he fails to achieve it. The king has made this sort of restriction for the proper growth of the prince in order to safeguard him from the intriguing environment of the palace. Consequently, his early days were “a blur of perpetual bewilderment, of an almost constant awareness of inadequacy of a desperate striving, to make adjustments” (*The Princes* 35). Though Abhayraj seldom gets his father’s love and care, his only wish is to prove his devotion and sacrifice to his autocratic father. It doesn’t mean that he loves his father; he hates him for his bad treatment to his mother, to his classmate Kanakchand and also to himself. Hence, the father and the son live in two different worlds— the world of son who always wants to live in the present and the world of the father who is blind to the present and lost in his past. The father believes that there is no need to be anxious about the activities of freedom fighters because “they just don’t exist” (*The Princes* 14), whereas the son is tensed in the changing scenarios of the country after the Independence. Therefore, the son is sad and baffled by the unpractical philosophy of his father and the resultant lack of cordial relations between them. Their bond reflects the relations between the ruler and the successor rather than the bonds between the father and the son. Even the son, just like a common man, has to bow before his father, whereas he wants the king to behave like a father to him and a loving husband to his mother. To his utter surprise he finds no change in his father’s philosophy of life. Consequently, he even wishes for the death of his father so that he could come into power and work accordingly. But, with the passage of time Abhay comes nearer to his father after his abdication from the throne and his bond with him becomes stronger. In the critical hours of his princely

life, Abhay becomes eager to protect his state from disintegration, for which he needs his father's help. His father helps him, though half-heartedly, and sadly communicates: "That is my regret at this moment. I have at least had my full innings, perhaps more than full, for none of us have lived beyond fifty. You... you will be losing everything before ever getting to know what it means" (*The Princes* 298). In fact, it is an example of the father-son bond in India where in spite of all the clashes and differences they come together in adverse circumstances.

V

Another important bond— between the mother and the son reveals the social status of woman in pre-Independence period. The mother, who is disappointed in her husband, turns to her son in order to relieve her pain and suffering. She, having great love for him, makes all her efforts for his good fortune. Being a good adviser to him, she advises him not to punish the palace officer for 'breaking' his favorite gun: "Punishment always rebounds; it grows more and more evil. Punishment is a primitive way of resolving matters" (*The Princes* 82). But, when his mother breaks away in order to achieve what his father has refused to give her after marriage, he forgets her sacrifice and love and shows his hatred to her: "You are nothing but a bitch, a shameless woman of the streets. You cheap whore!" (*The Princes* 321). On the other hand, the mother, who has been living under the fond hope that her son at least would understand and love her, loves and hands over her everything to him before her departure to Pakistan. She, who ultimately finds the image of his father in him and consciously struggles for her survival, appears as one of the most pathetic personalities in the fiction

VI

Malgonkar, whose vision of Indian society is apparent in the historical presentation of the themes and characters of his novel,

even goes so far as to trace human bonds in the friendship between Abhayraj, the prince and Kanakchanda, the pauper. Abhay as a boy is a good human being and has full compassion and love for the underprivileged boy and, therefore, helps him in his study by book-sharing. He also exchanges playthings and gives a chocolate to him in the school. His gentle behaviour impresses Kanakchand, who also values his friendship. Therefore, when Abhay becomes ill, he comes to the palace-gate inquiring after his health; whereas the prince always like to spend his time with him and even invites him to the palace for the annual party in spite of the strong opposition of his another friend Charudutt. Moreover, Abhay, knowing it well that he would not be able to continue his studies without scholarship, prepares an essay for him, resulting in the King's horsewhipping the poor boy for making the fraud. Abhay feels dejected. Here, his mother, who promises to compensate by bearing all expenses of Kanakchand's higher education, comes to help them. But after this incident, Kanakchand does not come to him for getting the financial support from the royal family. It creates gaps in their bonds making it bitter and unpleasant thereafter. Consequently, Abhay-Kanakchand bond, hereafter, moves on opposite directions. When Kanakchand comes back from exile, after Independence, the bond between the two becomes more hateful. As the 'mandal' leader in Begwad, he rigorously works for the dissolution of the princedom. While Abhay and the king are worried and wounded in the adverse situation, he and his men show their arrogance. No wonder, the sadistic and devious words of Kanakchand pinches Abhay, who is surprised and disappointed to see his negative attitude. This paradigm shift from friendship to enmity in the bond of Abhay-Kanakchand is just opposite to the bond of Kanakchand-Charudutt, which not only changes from initial enmity to friendship- Charudutt pushed Kanakchand and his books into a pool in the school due to his hatred for the untouchables in pre-Independence period and Kanakchand shows his friendship to him in order to

humiliate the royal family after Independence, but also reflects “paradigm shift of values in life and society” (Chauhan 27) of India.

VII

Manohar Malgonkar’s rational and sophisticated attitude to human bonds profoundly and effectively replicates the gloomy history of socio-political affairs of an Indian state in which the men and women, particularly of royal family, struggle and survive through the inescapable chain of events leading to the decline of royal tradition and emergence of democracy and new value-system in India in his magnum opus *The Princes*, justifying “the duty of the novelist to recreate the past and make it contemporary” (Marshal 95).

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