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Symbolism in Manohar Malgonkar's *Combat Of Shadows*

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Abstract

Writing chiefly about the colonial and early post-colonial India, Malgonkar employs various tools in his works to weave an interesting tale depicting psychological, emotional, social and political power struggles. Like many other post-colonial writers he too makes use of symbols to convey various ideas and bring out the distinction between the two sides, natives and masters. Malgonkar's symbols range from simple artifacts, to symbolic names and also to symbols from animal world. *Combat of Shadows* is replete with the use of symbols that aid in the development and knitting of the plot as well as further the reader's understanding of the times. This paper shall attempt both to enlist various symbols used and comprehend their meaning.

Keywords

Manohar Malgonkar; Colonization; Native; Oppression; Beliefs; and Love.



Manohar Malgonkar (12 July 1913 – 14 June 2010) is regarded as one of the prolific writers of Indian English Literature. Born as he was into an elite society of royals, his circle gave him an in-depth knowledge of the psychology of the class. He experienced and witnessed colonization in its latter years, and also witnessed independent India and its struggles. Colonization thereby forms the background of many of his works. *Combat of Shadows* (1962) qualifies as a perfect example of a Post-Colonial text. Malgonkar's depiction of Brindean Tea Company as a microcosm for the majestic Imperial rule is successful. He efficiently highlights the Eurocentric attitude of majority of colonizers, contrasted against the apathy of natives and their primitive yet rooted belief system. Symbolism is one of the major devices that Malgonkar employs to serve this purpose. His symbols are easy to comprehend, and are relatable to an Indian reader. It is through these symbols that he weaves the intricate fabric of the plot. Various parallels can be drawn with other post-colonial texts like *Things Fall Apart*, *My Place* etc., based on the use of symbols. This paper attempts to study the use of symbolism in *Combat of Shadows*, the various categories of symbols used and their importance in the novel's structure will be assessed.

The Oxford Companion to English Literature defines symbolism as the “stress on the priority of suggestion and evocation over direct description and explicit analogy” (969). J.A. Cuddon's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* describe symbol as “an object animate or inanimate, which represents or ‘stands for’ something else. As Coleridge put it, a symbol is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual. A symbol differs from an allegorical sign in that it has a real existence, whereas an allegorical sign is arbitrary” (699). Symbol thereby is a device the author employs to stand for the concept he wishes to convey. An object an action, a gesture, a place, a name, an animal – all of these can be used as symbols to convey an abstract idea through their existence. Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows* has many kinds of

symbols – some names are symbolic, some places too are symbolic, it has symbols from the animal world and some happenings/ events are symbolic too. I shall thereby attempt to locate and enlist each of these symbols and discuss their meaning and importance in the scene.

Mr. Jeffrey Dart, Henry Winton and Cockburn are the chief Englishmen in the novel. They symbolize the Brindian Tea Company. Malgonkar's portrayal of characters is realistic; they are life-like and relatable. The naming is a little similar to Dickens', for some of the names are symbolic. These men symbolize colonization, the imperial Rule, but their rank and personality gives each of them their distinctness. Jeffrey Dart, the Director General of the Brindian Tea Company, stands as the most important symbol of British rule. The company, its profit, its rules are the things that lead him on. All he is concerned about is his duty and the Empire's name and reputation, "... The empire is a hellish big thing, but in the last analysis it is nothing more than a few thousand of... of hard core men like you and me, doing our jobs and taking care not to let the side down" (Malgonkar 35).

He exploits peasants, tries to buy anyone who he feels can rebel, gets involved with colonized women, is Eddie Trevor's father but does not accept him openly and advises his managers too to not get seriously, emotionally involved with native or Anglo – Indian women, and use them just for their fun. He is like many other colonizers who have children of mixed blood but are scared to father them (Sally's search for her roots, Nan's past, relations with Arthur Corruna). The identity crisis of such children and their mothers is one issue seen in many Post-Colonial novels. Like his nick name Sudden and his last name Dart- Sudden Dart, his decisions are sometimes sudden (concerning just the Empire), he is a shrewd, plotting, authoritative colonizer who as Cockburn said, "knows what make the Empire tick better than any of us. He may be a pompous fool, but in many ways he represents the British Empire even more than the Viceroy himself" (Malgonkar 45).

Cockburn, the manager of the tea estate of the secluded, remote area Lamlung is symbolic of the few sympathetic, kind hearted members of the Imperial rule. His career, his advent to higher posts is thwarted by his undiplomatic ways and considerate dealing with the colonized. His name (cock-gun, burn-destroy) is symbolic of the chief role he plays in the novel – that of hiding the truth of Henry's failed cartridges and Kistulal's death. "There was no room in India for sahibs who failed... everything that concerns a sahib is political" (Malgonkar 95). Cockburn used to thank his servants, talk politely to all his workers, use fond endearments and his estate's yield always proved his success, but his ways did not correspond to those of his class. A semblance to Achebe's Mr. Brown is noticeable. The conscious effort on the part of the writers to not miss mentioning the presence of empathetic few among the colonizers, and the thwarted career than awaited them due to their behavior lends authenticity and credibility to such texts.

Jugal Kishore, is symbolic initially of double consciousness of a native, then of a rebellious extremist and then of a to-be neo colonizer. He had no qualms, no ethics stopping him from using his niece for advancing his status. He tried hard to get her involved with Henry, and thereby become one of the colonizers. When failed he rebelled, initiated strikes, propagated anti-British ideas. "You'll all be running away soon, all you Englishmen!" (Malgonkar 119). In the latter part of the novel he sides with the British to get himself a seat in the legislative assembly. Franz Fanon's concept of Neo-colonization, as explained in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is aptly represented by Jugal Kishore.

Eddie Trevor and Ruby Miranda represent Anglo-Indians, who struggle for an identity. They have some privileges that elevate their status above the colonized, but whatsoever, they can never match the colonizer. Despite being Mr. Dart's son, and being a cheerful, successful, passionate youth, he is never able to reach those heights of success, owing to his mixed blood. Ruby Miranda symbolizes the considerate woman, who gives in her all in order to get married

to Winton, and later does not shirk away from avenging herself when wronged. She is a Newwoman, has a mind of her own, makes her choices, is not a plaything in the hands of the patriarchal system, and knows how to compose and collect herself after failure.

Henry Winton is the chief protagonist in the novel. He symbolizes racial superiority and racial discrimination in its worst form. He symbolizes the conceited colonizer – who may have been a failure at home, but is a master here, owing to his color. It is in relation to him that we get to discover the rest of the symbols in the novel. The title *Combat of Shadows* is itself symbolic, Henry Winton's notions of racial superiority lead him to a lot of trouble throughout life and ultimately to a ghastly, dreadful end. The novel is an account of his encounter and combat with various shadows that are all the creations and outcome of his own racial prejudices. It is as if he is followed stealthily by all the anti – party forces (his foes)- as shadows, and howsoever he tries to fight with them, thinking that now they have a concrete, tangible existence, he is brought upon a revelation that he has lost the duel again - the forests, the one – tusked elephant, the python, the war, guns, Ruby Miranda, Eddie Trevor, Jugal Kishore, Gauri, Jean Walters, Pasupati, Kistulal are all shadows. They are always in the hindsight, following him in the trajectory of his life. Every time one of them seems to have come to the fore, armed for the combat, Henry is on the guard and ready to attack, but finds himself a loser again, for who can win and defeat a shadow. Each of these shadows push him to the edge, test his abilities and ultimately consume him in the fire at the game cottage.

The setting of the novel is the dense forest area in Assam, and the lush and verdant tea plantations in the forests. From Chinnar, to the game cottage, to Silent hill and to Lamlung, we are always aware of the presence of the forests. Though initially one feels there presence is passive, it is gradually that the realization dawns upon you that they have a bearing on Henry's life all

through. The forest is symbolic of a maze of life in which man, here Henry, is trapped and no matter what he does he cannot escape its trappings. Though the actual venture into forest is limited to latter part of the novel, its calling, and its involvement can be felt all along. The forest may also be taken as a symbol for India, its complex culture, its complex myths and its unique way of life that was different from that of the colonizers. They made no attempt (almost none) to unravel, or comprehend it, thereby widening the gap. To the British, Indian people were just the subjects, and India their territory. Other than that Indians were like a remote, unreachable, forest, almost ghastly to them. But it is the prowess, the might of the forest that symbolizes the might of the Indians. They may claim to be the rule them but their oppression and atrocities could be answered back, they could be forced to flee their land, and were as history proves. Malgonkar's protagonist Henry Winton is unable to penetrate the dense forest, locate his object of hunt and is unable to combat the extremes of despair that engulf him once he is within the forest. The lame tracker, Kistulal, who accompanies Henry on his first venture into the forests to kill the one – tusked elephant, is described as "Kistulal was always grinning" (Malgonkar 85). Probably his grin symbolized his intuitive knowledge of Winton's failure and consequent doom, and his role in it. Kistulal symbolizes the mystic, the man of forest, who knows its mysteries and is fearless, ready to sacrifice his life to initiate the chain of events that will lead to the chilling, scary almost gothic, benumbing denouement. The use of forests as symbol is an important aspect of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* too. The two settings of the novel, Umuofia and Mbaino are both surrounded by dense forests that represent the intricate myths, superstitions, and belief system of the Igbo people. The New Yam Festival to celebrate the produce, the belief in egwugwu, the chi- personal god, the throwing away of twins as ill fated, casting away of sufferers of oedema all are part of their complex belief system, painting for the world the native's side of the story.

Within the surrounding Koyna forests of Assam, there are three, human establishments where majority of the novel is set, the Silent Hill, the Chinnar office and game cottage, and Lamlung. The Silent Hill is the name of Henry's bungalow at his estate. The name is symbolic of the overall vibe of the place. The place demanded peace, satisfaction and compliance to norms. Any disturbance to the environment, any change and hell is seen unleashed on the person. The previous manager is said to have been reckless in his association with native women, which got him sacked. Ironically all through the novel the silence of the place is hardly restored. The first meeting with Jugal Kishore, the verbal fight between them, the fight with Ruby Miranda, Jean and Eddie Trevor's dance, the plot of faulty cartridges leading to Eddie's death, the fear of the one tusker- there is a pall of fear, stress infidelity over the house since the very start. Out of the three chief locales of the novel, it is only Lamlung where a symbiotic relationship is seen flourishing. The two communities, of the workers and of master have a mutual respect, regard for each other, but that too, is unacceptable to the evil forces around – Jeffery Dart tries his best to sack him. Cockburn always had words of gratitude to address the Indians – any Indian and every Indian. Lamlung workers' love for him is evident post his death.

This must be the first time in Brindian history that the coolies on a garden had offered to set aside a part of their pay for a memorial to a manager, Henry reflected, and once again found himself wondering what it was that had made Cockburn so popular with the Indians. (Malgonkar 202)

Chinnar and the Game cottage are central to the Brindian Tea Company. They are symbolic of their luxurious living, their racial superiority, their style and extravagance. The Centre of authority in the Eastern part of India, it is under Director General Mr. Dart's supervision, who tries to maintain and further augment the outer charm of British society. Their weekends at game cottage, their hunting escapades, Christmas parties and relegation of Anglo –

Indians to lower positions and Indians to menial – all symbolize colonization. The Game cottage in the latter half on the novel becomes a symbol of refuge – an escape from the outer world, for Ruby and Henry, but soon it is here that Henry succumbs to all shadows, gets to know each shadow's identity and is consumed alive by the fire lit by those shadows.

Wallach's folly near the Silent Hill was a small edifice built by the previous manager. The place all through is a symbol of defiance, denial of regulations and infidelity. It is the site built by Wallach without the British Government's permission and it is the site where Gauri brings Henry, to show him that his wife Jean had been cheating him with Eddie. It was their favorite refuge, away from both, the eyes of the world and the chains of customs.

Abuse and hit the Indians and their women, because you are impotent to punish a man who is taking your wife right before your eyes, and every coolie on the garden knows it. Look! Look! If I am dirty minded take a good look at that clean white wife of yours!
(Malgonkar 272)

The One -tusked rogue is probably the most important symbol in the novel. For most part of the novel, almost all of it, it is not the part of the scene physically, but it is mentioned and its presence is felt. He is the chief shadow that follows Henry – why he is lured into taking up the responsibility of hunting it down is the question that bewilders the reader. It leads to the whole faulty cartridge fiasco, the gun being termed evil/ cursed, the decision to present a twisted account of the encounter leading to Kistulal's death, it leads to the delay in Winton's joining war, leads to the entry into the Koyna forests' maze, leads to Eddie's death and his part in it and finally it is the one- tusker that leads Henry to his doom,

The one-tusker had become a symbol, not just a rogue to be hunted down, a symbol and also a deadly and cunning adversary equally determined to set him out and destroy him, an enemy more

hateful than Jugalkishore himself – a private Hitler. For the moment, it was the supreme, all pervading presence, blotting out the horizon of his mind. Until the elephant was killed, he, Henry Winton, would know no peace. (Malgonkar 257)

Another important symbol from the animal world, used by Malgonkar is the python. The python and his “mating call” (Malgonkar 185) are a symbol for carnal desires, lust, and the search for suitable mate, that is the ruling emotion throughout the novel. Henry tries to woo Jean Wellers, who does not see him as her suitable mate, yet wanted him to propose. “There is someone ... someone... Someone you love?.. Yes Henry. And yet... I wanted you to say what you have said” (Malgonkar 43). Shunning his racial prejudice partially Henry initially takes Ruby Miranda as his mistress, adores her passion and her give-it-all manner. Later, he abandons her, partially due to the misunderstanding (he thought she told Eddie of the vacancy in Henry’s estate) but also due to his feeling of racial superiority that favored Jean. “That was the woman for whom he was rearranging his whole life, and his getting rid of her, Ruby Merenda, was all a part of it, just like getting an English speaking houseboy, and new furniture and curtains for the bungalow” (Malgonkar 159).

But he is unable to forget Ruby Miranda and soon finds solace in her arms again. It is this urge to find a satisfying companion that drives every character. The irony is that the python’s call for a partner gives humans a right to mock him, laugh at his urge, “Getting impatient for love, is not he?” (Malgonkar 188), oblivious to the fact that it is the same urge than drives them, makes them defypropriety, and even choose infidelity. Ruby Miranda and Eddie Trevor are told to be in love with each other. “Eddie loved her with a kind of fierce possessiveness that was almost pathological; no one else could understand it. It was intense, almost animal – like” (Malgonkar 108)., but Ruby chooses Winton over him to quench her desire to be accepted and be a part of the White community “... the compulsive craving of Anglo India to seek living

kinship with the west, the desperate daily struggle of separation and alignment...”(Malgonkar 109). Jean likewise finds herself dissatisfied with Henry, and maintains a secret relationship with Eddie even after her marriage to Henry.

The three women in the novel represent three different ideologies. These ideologies and personality differences stem from their position in the colonization / imperial rule. Ruby Miranda symbolizes the Anglo – Indian, with the desire to be a part of the ruling class. She tries hard to mould herself to fit in but later she turns vengeful (when she thinks she has been severely wronged), by contributing to Henry’s murder/ accident plan. Jean represents the secure English woman, who has the liberty to make her decisions, marry Henry, love Eddie then leave Henry. The woman we see the least in the novel is Gauri – the native. Unlike her uncle Jugal Kishore she has no intention to be a neo – colonizer, no hidden urge to get to a position of power. She is the native, who is first compelled by her circumstances to steal, then offered as a commodity to Henry in return for the post of the senior headmistress, but once she is fully acquainted of the subservient, valueless position she holds, she wages a war against the British (Henry in her context) – initiating strikes, provoking people for raising their voices for justice. Her fight is a fight of a sincere, educated, unemployed underdog, curbed native – trying to drive foreign rule out of her land. At the climax when Henry slaps her brother, one sees her as a symbol of Goddess Kaali, or even of Chandi.

Gauri turned on Henry, white faced and venomous, her eyes glinting with a burning all – consuming rage, reminding Henry of a hooded cobra about to strike or an outraged temple goddess. ‘I shall kill you for this you white monster’ she hissed. ‘I shall kill you’.
(Malgonkar 147)

Towards the end it is she, who exposes Jean – Eddie’s relationship before Henry.

You're so brave, aren't you Winton sahib, when you're dealing with women and little boys – Indian woman and Indian boys! What happens to your courage when you meet your own kind – your own women? You are quite powerless before them, like a scorpion before a lizard. (Malgonkar 269)

After Henry hurts his leg at Wallach's folly one sees the angered Goddess being merciful. She helps and supports him till the Silent Hill entrance gates.

There are symbols from animal world, landscape symbols, symbolic names and also symbolic things in the novel. The cartridge became symbol for Kistulal's death and Henry's hand in it, the earrings became symbol for Miranda's relinquishing her love and rejecting Henry's offer of re-kindling their love. Probably the fault in electricity became symbol for the reigning of shadows. The forest with the essence of the one – tusker and the python, Ruby Miranda, Pashupati (Kistulal's son), Jeffrey Dart (Eddie's real father) side together and Henry loses the battle with the shadows, gets consumed in the fire of revenge, as Amur says about Winton's story, "It culminates in the hero's apocalyptic realization of the 'moment of truth'"(39). The Second World War becomes a symbol of refuge for the characters in novel. Each of the characters tries to take advantage of the opportunity and enter into the war to escape from the burdens, and complications that were ruining their lives, though apparently Patriotism and desire to prove one worthy was being put forth as the reason. Jean wanted to serve in war, and so did Henry and Eddie want to join the troops.

There is a noticeable similarity between Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Both the novels qualify to be perfect examples of Post-Colonial writings and both of them employ symbols to serve a similar purpose. Both the novels try to present a true account of their side of the story, their struggle without completely blaming or throwing mud at the colonizers. Malgonkar's *Cockburn* and Achebe's *Mr. Brown* are considerate

Britishmen. Forests and landscape symbolize respective cultures, myths – thereby projecting the complexity of natives’ belief system, which is neither comprehensive to the colonizer nor does he try to be reverend towards it. There are characters who exhibit Bhabha’s concept of “Mimicry” (Sankaran). There is an overall struggle for searching and expressing one’s identity. The burning of the English church in *Things Fall Apart*, leading to exposing of egwugwu, is similar to the resistance and rebellion that Henry faces, when he slaps Gauri and her younger brother and threatens the rest of sacking, starvation and homelessness.

Language plays a very important role in this novel, with regards, to Ruby Miranda. Her Anglo- Indian way of speaking, her prolongation of vowels hinders her from passing as a British, and qualifies her above the native. She is constantly trying to fit it. This is similar to Sally’s search for her identity, tracing her roots in *My Place*, wherein she too is neither British, nor native Australian. This physical as well as mental “hybridity”(Sankaran) leads to the struggle to find a place, a place where one fits,

“You're very beautiful, dear”, she said, “what nationality are you, Indian?”

“No”, I smiled, “I'm Aboriginal.”

She looked at me in shock. “You can't be,” she said.

“I am.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” she said, putting her arm around me, “what on earth are you going to do?” (Morgan 36)

Language is undoubtedly an integral part of Post-Colonial writings. Achebe uses Igbo words here and there throughout the novel, to give it the flavor and ethnic touch of his native culture. Where the mixed bloods suffered due to difference in accent, the native suffered due to complete lack of comprehension of foreign tongue. These writings are a way of the now informed native to revert back to the Eurocentric projection of the orient.

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe 112)

The one – tusker, who is symbolic of Lord Shiva, god of Destruction is behind Henry's destruction, Shiva must have ordained all of it. Almost no one except Kistulal agrees to help in hunting him down, for he was Shiva, despite his having killed many innocents during his forays into plantations. This is similar to various questionable beliefs of the Igbo people. The mention of throwing away of twins, the innumerable superstitions that held their lives in control, have two fold purpose. First, to bring home to natives that there are some things, practices in their culture that need to change, or need to be shed with time. Second, to familiarize the master in their tongue that their perception of the native as sub-human, underdeveloped, incomprehensible primitive was not justified, rather was just a lopsided view of things to meet their purpose.

The novel is therefore undoubtedly rich in symbolism. The symbolism is similar to that of other Post-Colonial writers. Some symbols represent Natives; some represent the Colonizers, while others symbolize some human traits or some events. Symbolism is neither plain blatant nor is it too complex and innovative like that of W.B. Yeats. Symbolism helps in building up the intricacies of the plot. They help the plot, and grip the reader's interest. The reader even if reading a chapter wherein there is no apparent tribulation, is aware of presence of shadows that are following Henry. An eerie presence can be felt all through after the one – tusker is initially mentioned. The reader no doubt is angered by Henry's prejudices, but the situational Irony that Malgonkar uses, makes Henry "more sinned against than sinning" (Shakespeare 3.2). He is actually not responsible for Kistulal's death, nor does

he recklessly abandon Ruby (it is because of the confusion he has of her infidelity), nor does he wish to harm Eddie before knowing of Jean's infidelity and nor does his plot actually kill Eddie (his high headedness and rash behavior does) but Henry bears the brunt of it all, and nor does anyone except Malgonkar, reader and the providences know the truth of it all. Everyone actually is a ploy in the hands of Shiva or fate, anything that one may choose to call. In praise of Malgonkar and the novel G. S. Amur says:

What makes *Combat of Shadows* superior to *Bhawani 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 of moral analysis which he was to put greater use in the later novels. (76)

Malgonkar works employ many such devices that help in elevating his status as a writer, though most of the critics have been of the view that his merit hasn't been acknowledged as much as he deserved. Realism, symbolism, situational irony, karma and kismet, are some common elements in recognizable in all his works. R.K. Narayan once said that Malgonkar was his favorite Indian English writer. A Padmanabhan, author of the book *The Fictional World Of Manohar Malgonkar*, refers to him as "a writer who has not yet received full critical attention as a significant Indo-English novelist. His major novels and short stories taken together reveal him as a writer keenly interested in Indian social life" (197).

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