



INTERPLAY OF KARMA AND KISMAT IN MANOHAR MALGONKAR'S A BEND IN THE GANGES

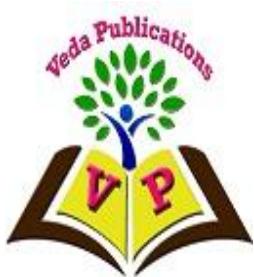
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ABSTRACT



Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, considered as one of the finest works of fiction depicting the Partition has been assessed by scholars enthusiastically for its narrative technique, symbols, motifs and the author's deft character delineation. This paper, however, tries to investigate the novel for the role that Karma and Kismat play in it. The initial attempt shall be to elucidate these two religious concepts in simple terms, not delving any deeper into theological and philosophical concerns. The major portion of this paper shall attempt to segregate each instance, each event involving each of its characters (major or minor) under these two heads of Karma and Kismat, thereby showing the hand of both karma and kimsat in shaping their lives. It is based on these two that the reader relates to characters, and empathizes some and despises some.

Keywords: *Kismat, Karma, Destiny, Choice, Partition, Religion, Communal Riot.*



Manohar Malgonkar's novel *A Bend in the Ganges*, is ranked among the finest works of fiction written on the Partition of India. Rituparna Roy says, "This novel is not just one of the most popular novels written on the Partition, but it is also one of the best known texts in the whole canon of Indian English Fiction" (Roy 47). The text portrays the lives of various characters, chiefly Debi Dayal, Gian Talwar and Shafi Usman, from approximately a decade before the Partition and up to the Partition. Voluminous as it is, the text gives a detailed insight into the personality of the characters.

The text beautifully brings out how life gives us ample opportunities to make decisions for ourselves and others. Through this period of ten to twelve years each character chooses the path of his life based on his or her thought process, their ethics, their priorities, their past, and their circumstances. An unseen hand of Fate or destiny can also be seen in the text. The text is Indian not only in its setting and background but also in the author's sensibility. Malgonkar's belief in the Indian Hindu/Sikh notions of Karma and Kismat can also be seen vividly in the text.

Karma theory believes that one makes his decisions, does actions accordingly and these actions good or bad are one's Karma. These Karmas are viewed and analyzed by the Divine when one dies. These Karmas decides our fortune in the life after death. The Kismat theory on the other hand, believes in the hand of God, in everything that happens in our life. It is believed that not even a leaf stirs of its own accord, for all is under His will. "Jeh bin Hukam Ikjhulanapaata" (Bhai Gurdas Ji, Vaar 41, Pauri 27). That is to say that everything from the rustling of the leaves to the biggest occurrence of sin in this universe is under His command. It is preordained, written by the providences. Delving deep into these two theories, one sometimes questions, if all is under His will, how is then something our Karma? The believer of this theory then replies that situation is His will that becomes one's Kismat, where as the reaction and the path chosen is our decision, which becomes the Karma of that individual. For instance, a mishap is His will-our Kismat, but our decision to contain ourselves and help others to overcome, or to wail and curse our luck becomes our Karma. If our Karma of the past

shape our Kismat always, sometimes or never, is contestable and a view that differs from person to person. Humans often attribute Kismat to some past karma but the link cannot be logically established, for these are mysteries of the higher providence. What this paper shall limit itself to is all that which is visible to us as readers, the characters' Karma and their Kismat. The why of it is not something which I shall try to decode for one can neither decode it in a text nor in our individual lives. The characters in any fictional text like wise can be assessed in the light of these two theories, for life always is interplay of the two. Another fact is that the characters are playthings in the hands of the author-the author determines their choices and also their destiny. This paper endeavors to consider and assess the novel from the perspective of these two theories. Though not completely synonymous, Karma and Choice, and Kismat and Destiny will be used synonymously for convenience.

The biggest fact in this novel, perhaps the only true incident is the Partition of India. Malgonkar, in his note preceding the text admits that all the characters throughout are fictitious and so are the incidents that occur in their specific lives. Some similarities may be drawn with some occurrences during the Indian freedom struggle, but they are not intentional. The partition of India and the violence that accompanied it is true. The fateful day of Indian freedom, the much awaited sunrise of the Indian freedom would accompany the Partition of the nation into India and Pakistan (East and West) was something no one had ever thought. Destiny and Kismat had decided it, the Providences had ordained it.

Thousands had to flee from the now Pakistan to the new Partitioned India and likewise thousands were made to flee from India to Pakistan. How things shaped, how the freedom struggle, which was predominantly non-violent, united and secular changed shape and how gradually the rift between Muslims and Hindus widened to such an extent, that it became irreparable, no one knows. No one in particular (the British and their divide and rule policy or the Hindus or the Muslims) can be blamed. It is as if Destiny had conspired it. But the communal riots that accompanied, the mass carnage, the bloodshed,



the slaughtering that resulted, is a collective blame, the weight of which is to be borne by many. Shafi, for instance is one of those who decided to kill, to rape, defying his conscience. The Kerwad family's name, their charity, was all forgotten. He felt no qualm in attempting to rape Sundari, no qualm in looting and plundering the family whose son he had befriended and later deceived. Destiny tests and man chooses, sometimes chooses the right Karma sometimes the wrong. Gian Talwar on the otherhand, safe in Bombay and a thorough opportunist, pragmatist and sometimes even villainous, chooses to come to Tekch and family's rescue. He listens to his conscience and chooses his path. Debi, safe with Mumtaz in India chooses to go to his family's assistance and loses his life on the way. Mumtaz chooses not to go into hiding but to face danger with Debi, and is abducted, in her own land despite being a Muslim. The intertwining of Kismat and Karma is evident in the last part of the novel. Thousands destined to flee, thousands destined to die, thousands destined to be raped, looted, plundered and on the otherhand thousands chose to slaughter, chose to rape, chose to loot and a very few chose to save, to shelter and to help. What is someone's Kismat is someone else's Karma. The difference though little, is distinct and one even in his conscience cannot project Karma to be God's will or one's Destiny.

There are two chief protagonists in the novel- Gian Talwar and Debi Dayal. The Novel revolves around their lives, families and their acquaintance circles. Their paths, the trajectory of their separate lives meet at some points but their choices separate them soon. Gian Talwar is first seen by the reader as a young man, who throws his foreign made warm blazer into the blazing fire of one of Mahatma Gandhi's Swadeshi movement gatherings in Duriabad. The reader views him as a patriot, a believer of Gandhi's ideals of Non-violence and truth. This karma was a result of a fit of momentary passion or was an ingrained belief, soon comes to fore.

Belonging to middle class family in Konshet village, Gian is given the opportunity to study at a college, by his elder brother Hari. Soon after their father's death Hari chooses to work hard, leave all luxuries, live on only basic-life sustaining necessities,

and save all possible money to pay his father's debt and to send Gian to the college. At Birch Bagh, under the pressure of being mocked at by the rest of the gang, Gian renounces his Janwa. The Birch Bagh incident lays the foundation of the ideals chosen and believed in by the main characters.

Shafi Usman consciously chooses to disguise as a Sikh, there by pointing to the secular nature of the Hanuman club and the freedom struggle. Debi chose the path of the Extremists, while Gian chooses Gandhi's path. How far will these characters go with their ideals? Are their beliefs, pretenses or undaunting, firm decisions, is what we find later. Their choices however, govern the path of their lives.

Gian's family is involved in a two generation old family feud, over a property named Piploda. Gian's grandfather chooses to follow his heart, marries Aji and then consciously chooses to leave his home for the dignity of his wife. He toils and converts the barren land of Piploda productive. Despite his emphasis on good Karma, Destiny had ordained something else for him. He discovers an idol of Shiva buried in his land, establishes Shiva as the God of his house, unknowing that Shiva had willed his destruction. After his death the feud over Piploda begins and we see how Shiva had willed the destruction and death of Gian's father and even Hari due to this piece of land. The cowardice hidden inside Gian's self comes to fore, when we see him standing benumbed while Hari goes to fight with Vishnu Dutta. Later, post Hari's murder, when the apt thing for him to do, was to complete his studies and then support Aji, we see him shedding his mask of non-violence and murdering Vishnu Dutta there by leaving his aged grandmother desolate.

Gandhi's non-violence was the non-violence of the brave, not of the cowards. Non-violence was a belief to be followed even at personal loss, not a facade to be borne till things are happening to others and shed when facing a personal agony. S.C.Sood commented, "What Malgonkar condemns is not ideals and idealism but people's superficial adherence to them". (Sood 199)

Debi Dayal, the only son of the rich, renowned businessman-Tekchand Kerwad, is seen as a consistently strong character throughout the novel. If one is to assess his Radix trait; it would be



righteousness, from the beginning and up to the very end. He chooses to be a patriot, an Extremist, a revolutionary but not a fanatic. He considers himself a responsible citizen and aims to fervently partake in the National struggle. He believes in the Hanuman club's slogan of Jai Ram- Jai Rahim, not for the time being but for all his life. He does not refrain from dropping the luxuries of his mansion and working for his nation in his way, however risky. Tints of jealousy and fear of the loss of power is seen in Shafi, the leader of their group but Debi is staunch and has no time for such weaknesses of personality. He chooses to steal dynamite from his father's factory. Somewhere he can be blamed for not being a support to his parents, but on close analysis one finds that the sexual molestation of his mother by a British official, that he witnessed in his childhood, is the root cause that led him to the National struggle of driving the British out of our land. He chooses not to be the one to relish material comforts of life, rather listens to the call of his mother land. Debi volunteers to be with Shafi in blowing the British aircraft. Shafi is unconsciously influenced by the religious fanatic Hafiz and when destiny puts on him the responsibility to choose members that would be safeguarded from police arrest, he chooses all Muslims.

Destiny brings Debi and Gian together on the ship ferrying prisoners to Central Jail, Andaman Islands, but their choices and Karma are in stark opposition to each other. Debi's righteousness and moral fiber gave him a confidence and a look different from the other convicts, "not broken and ingratiating like the others but proud, straight and haughty" (Malgonkar 100). Gian wondered as to how, the boy whose fortune and prospects he envied chose such a path and was still happy with himself. Debi on the other hand wondered as to what could have led the so called follower of Gandhi to shed his belief in non-violence and be charged with murder. Both were labeled as 'D'convicts but their paths changed from the very beginning. Even in the despicable conditions of the ship, in which they were cloistered together, Debi dared to complain and raise voice for his rights, unlike all others. At the Andamans, Gian with his ability to flatter and serve the officials soon began to traverse very different path. He grew close to the officials, appeased them

and was soon allowed to mix with the other prisoners. Debi on the other hand chose not to bow or even 'Salaam' the officials. He was punished for watching from the creeks in his cell, but no amount of punishment could change his mind and make him succumb.

Gian was soon given the work of a clerk and other menial jobs, under Mulligan. He had to sort letters and choose those to be of importance to Patrick Mulligan, the chief jail official. Gian chose to read Sundari's letter addressed to Debi. When Debi threw it off, he chose to keep it with himself and when he later discovered three hundred rupees hidden behind the photographs, he chose not to tell it to Debi and hid them in a jack fruit tree. His continual apparent good work and service elevated him in the eyes of Mulligan. When there were suspicions of rebellion from the prisoners during the World War, Mulligan assigned Gian with the task of vigilance, and gave him a whistle to blow when he saw some suspicious activity. He was to keep an eye on Debi. When the money fiasco was discovered, Gian did not confess having hidden the money in the jackfruit tree and let the suspicion go on Debi. He, in a moment of weakness, whistled when Debi attacked Balbahadur and attempted to escape. Gian's choice to please the officials led to his defaming among fellow prisoners and Debi's heroic suffering on being flogged led him to be idealized by all convicts, and even some officials. Padmanabhan remarked, "Malgonkar's conception of Debi as a Christ-like figure character is evident from his truthfulness, determination, and compassion. The picture of Debi whipped on the gallows reminds us of Christ on the cross" (Padmanabhan 111). When conditions worsened for the British, everyone in the jail looked at Debi as their leader. Gian by the time was a 'feri'-earning around sixty rupees a month. Gian's pragmatic decisions and disloyalty to Debi, led him to shame and reproach in his own eyes. But trust once lost is not easy to gain and so Debi chose not to trust him in his plan with Ghasita Ramoshi of escaping in a boat. Debi said, "I would willingly rot in a cell here rather than associate with some one like you and become free" (Malgonkar 205).

One's life hinges on the basis of one's choices and decisions. Tables turned for the British.



Destiny led to Japanese takeover on the Andaman Islands. The British officials and Gian (their servant and a traitor for the Indian convicts) had to flee to save their lives. Debi was taken up by the Japanese and was given the task to work for them. He was trained and sent to India, via Burma. He was told not to dwindle from his motive, lest he will have to pay gravely. The Japanese's cruelty, known to Debi, could not scare him into doing something against his conscience. He worked as a farm hand in Assam tea plantations, remained in hiding, collected day to day news, but did not do anything for the Japanese. He chose to free his motherland from any kind of foreign rule-British or Japanese. Any prospect of better future could not lure him into defying his ideals. Contrarily, Gian's early days in India were spent comfortably, using the money, i.e., gold coins he chose to take out from dead Ramoshi's secret body pocket near his ears. There he was amazed at the presence of mind, the self-centeredness, and pragmatic attitude of Gian when even in his haste to escape from the island, post Japanese takeover he remembers to take gold from Ramoshi's corpse.

Gian and Debi's lives face similar situations again in the novel. Both are back in their country after six years. They are faced with the decision to start afresh. While Debi, believing it inappropriate to side with the Japanese, decides to remain inactive for some time (till the World War ends), Gian's intellect soon provides him away to establish himself. Gian chose to defy scruples once again. He decides to go to Duriabad. On the way, he stopped at his village-Konshet, visited his house- "The Little House" and took the idol of Shiva from there. That was the only thing that revenue officials had left in their house. Gian used the God of the Little House to build preliminary acquaintance with Tekch and Kerwad. Later, he chose to lie to the grieving parents that he was Debi's trusted friend at the Andamans. He went to the extent of saying that he had proposed to Debi to escape along with him, but Debi was too angry with his father to come back. He told them that Debi wanted them to give him a secure job. Opportunist, self-centered as he always was, he knew which cord to strike, to get his purpose realized. A deceiver, a betrayer to Debi, he shamelessly used his name to compel Tekchand to give him a good job (as a

supervisor of their business at the docks in Bombay) and wins the family's sympathies, including Sundari's. Sundari is seen all through as a loving, caring sister to Debi and a dedicated child to the parents. She chooses to side with Debi, all through their childhood and even on discovering his inclination towards revolutionaries. She marries as per her parents' wishes. Soon after the marriage she gets to know of Gopal's infidelity but she tries to reconcile. Her loyalty to her parents and her love for Debi is unshakable. Later, for her parent's happiness she returns to Gopal again. Gian's claims of true friendship with Debi, initiates Sundari's interest in Gian. Deceived by Gopal and alone in Bombay, (Gopal was in British army during the World War), she grows close to Gian. Gian lies to her that Debi gave him Sundari's photographs and that Debi knew and approved of Gian's feelings for his sister. Sundari develops feelings for Gian, though she is unsure if something such as love actually existed. She saves him from the explosion at the docks and brings him to her home. He lives there and consciously chooses to trespass those limits, which he had maintained till then, for inwardly he was always aware of the innumerable lies to the Kerwads, betrayals he had given Debi, that were at the base of his association with the family. He is earlier seen as being happy inwardly of having done at least something ethical in his life, "he was pleased with himself that the evening had ended as it had; he had not done or said anything to make him feel ashamed of himself." (Malgonkar 218) But during this stay they do get intimate. Soon Gian chooses to leave Sundari's house on the pretext that he would continue their relationship only if she is ready to divorce Gopal and marry him. Sundari, who thinks of sex as only an act of lust and passion is not totally convinced with his view.

Our karma pay, to day or tomorrow, they definitely reveal our true self. Debi confronts Shafi and gets still convinced with his explanation, but Shafi again deceives him. A thorough fanatic and a supporter of Partition and the Muslim league, he informs the police of Debi and Basu's presence in the town but the two have an arrow escape. Debi's decision of buying Mumtaz to inflict injury upon Shafi is the first instance in the novel, wherein the reader is unable to comply with Debi's choice, but soon the



reader is convinced that probably the reason and decision was not correct, but the two were meant to be together. Debi instinctively saves Mumtaz from Shafi's acid bulb attack. His hand is burnt by the two acid bulbs hurled initially at Mumtaz's face. It is in this phase of pain, when Mumtaz's devotion, care and unquestioning sincerity, wins his heart and he decides never to leave her and marry her after his family's consent.

It is now that Debi meets Sundari and the layers of lies that Gian had carefully framed are peeled off. Sundari, born and brought up in a traditional Hindu family, now emerges as the New Woman. On being wronged she denies to be a victim anymore, and takes a stand for herself. She is seen as a confident, strong woman, who deceived by men twice, decides not to bear any of them any more. She calls Gian to her house, Gian hopes that she must have decided to leave Gopal and marry him. She gets intimate with him at the same spot where she had seen Gopal and Malini getting intimate, and arranges the scene in such away; at such a time, that Gopal must see it from the telescope she had placed in the balcony. Then she unravels to Gian that she knows every thing about him and throws him out of her life. Soon she leaves Gopal too and returns to her parents. She decides to help Debi in getting his parents know about his coming back to India and also in getting their acceptance for Mumtaz. All the characters till now in the Novel are seen to have chosen their paths of life. Their lives have depended on the Karma they did. But destiny or Kismat gives them the biggest blow by a demonstration of its majestic power through the Partition.

Debi and Mumtaz are on their way to Duriabad. They had dreams of a happy married life in their eyes but destiny had other plans. Mumtaz decides to stay with Debi despite the danger. Debi decides to go to his family's rescue and Destiny decides their lives' ends. As the train enters the now Pakistan, the Muslims fanatics decide to avenge themselves and do the same what Hindu and Sikh fanatics were doing on the other side. Debi is killed after the discovery that he is not a Muslim (not circumscribed) and Mumtaz bears the brunt of being with Debi, she is abducted and killed. Debi who is most passionate (of all characters) to see the sun of

India's freedom, the sunrise of Indian independence, was unaware of destiny's plans. He never knew that the sunrise of 15th August 1947 would be the last thing he would ever see.

Tekchand Kerwad, the most successful businessman of Punjab, a highly kind and charitableman, a thorough follower of law (whose particularity and righteousness somewhere led to Debi's arrest), a strong believer of the Hindu faith and a man respected even by the police, is left helpless by Partition. Despite his wife and Sundari's timely pleas of leaving, he decides not to leave his land. He is confident that the furor will subside soon and things will return to normal. Things worsen, as ordained by destiny. There is regular news of hundreds being killed. Their last refuge is the police convoy. Even the police, who once were under Tekchand's awe, start behaving rudely. Gian, to the reader's amazement, comes all the way from Bombay to Duriabad to the Tekchand family's help. The reader sees allthrough that though he does karma for his benefit, his conscience, his rationale of right and wrong wasn't dead. His inner pricked when he left Hari in his moment of cowardice, it pricked when he stole Debi's money sent by Sundari, it pricked when he whistled and led Debi to being flogged, it pricked when he lied to Tekchand Kerwad to get a job, it pricked when he grew near to Sundari on the pretense of being Debi's trusted friend, but all through he curbed the voice of his conscience and chose to do Karma that would lead to his benefit. It is at the very end that he realizes his mistake and tries to be of use to the Kerward family. He accepts his misdeeds to Sundari and asserts, "to try to prove, if only to myself, that there can be some good in the weakest of human beings."(Malgonkar 298) Mrs. Kerwad is killed. Mr.Tekchand Kerward, who is about to cross the border and be safe, chooses not to leave his wife and runs back. The police chose to deceive and misinform Gian about the timing of the last convoy. Shiva brings Shafi's destruction, as Sundari attacks him with Shiva's idol. Gian's intelligence helps them to reach the convoy but Tekchand returns, while Gian and Sundari are compelled to cross the border without him.

Destiny and choice play a role in every character's life. Debi is seen as a brave heart, who



chooses to act and make the right choice in every moment of crisis. Gian, in contrast is a round character, who chooses the easy and beneficial path in every moment of crisis except the last decision to come to the Kerwads' rescue. Debi is seen accepting Kismat and working, striving towards his goal. Gian is seen taking his ill fate as an opportunity to digress from righteousness. It is only in the end that he returns to morality and his return is majestically rewarded by Destiny, by saving him. Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks about Gian and Debi's destinies that, "They are shaped by two factors: the forces of history, and the elements of their personalities. Gian who adopts his policy to suit every circumstance, by cringing, deceiving, humiliating himself, bending with every wind, finally stands the storm, while Debi Dayalis broken because he refuses to make a compromise with circumstances." (Mukherjee 25)

Shafi, a trusted leader of the Hanuman club's gang of revolutionaries, is weak in moral fiber. His weakness is seen early in the novel, when he fears his loss of authority and leadership over the members. His agenda of National Independence is shaken under Hafiz's influence. He turns a fanatic, deceives his friends, later deceives them again, and shamelessly throws acid on Mumtaz (his beloved), when Debi takes her. In the end he brings the Kerwad family's destruction. His Karma bear fruit and the Lord of destruction— Shiva wills his death, and executes it through his own idol. Gian's brother Hari is a man of valor, courage, sacrifice and dutifulness. His Karmas are of a true hero. He does not curse Kismat for bringing him to such tough situations early in his life. He sacrifices and toils for Gian's education, toils and succeeds in the family feud case, valiantly confronts Vishnu Dutta. But what can be done if Shiva has willed one's destruction? The Little House's God— Shiva brings destruction of the grandfather, father, Hari, Aji and even of Gian (though Karma are more responsible for his life's path). Aji is a character who is the subservient Indian woman who accepts her Kismat, happen what may. She shows her moral fiber and courage when after Hari's murder she advises Gian to continue his studies, while she would look after herself and manage the administration of their fields. Tukaram is seen as a faithful, hard working servant, who suffers badly and is made to

change his verdict under torture. Gopal is seen as a confused descendent of the Royal family. He decides to marry Sundari, but is unable to come to terms with Debi's reality. He is unable to refuse the overtures of Malini, and is unable to make his marriage successful. Sundari is an attractive modern girl. Her loyalty and her efforts to be true to all her relationships can be seen allthrough. But destiny wrongs her everytime. She loses Debi, is deceived by Gopal, is deceived by Gian and even loses her parents in the end. But she is courageous enough. She defies the old Indian parameters of 'Pativrata' and 'Sati- Savitri' and speaks for herself.

Shiva in the novel appears as a recurring symbol—a motif. He is seen in different forms— as the God of the "little house" (Malgonkar 23), as the material artifact when Gian sells it to Tekchand Kerwad, as a destroyer of the Talwars, and as a weapon in the hands of Sundari, to kill Shafi. Malgonkar's expertise is evident. The constant play of Karma and Kismat in the life of all characters brings out Malgonkar's Indianess and attachment to his roots. The charges of nurturing pro-British sentiments are levied against him and are even pointed out in the characterization of Gian at some places, but these should be regarded as his bold acceptance of some innate goodness even in the British, and not as his disloyalty to the Indian cause. None of his characters give up in life or sit back and wail. Happen what may, they accept their Kismat and do their Karma according to their cognition. The valiant hearts like Debi, the dutiful Mumtaz, the new Indian woman Sundari, the loyal businessman Tekchand and even the opportunist but innately good Gian are characters one cannot forget.

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