

The Devil's Wind: Revaluating the Portrayal of Nana Saheb

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Abstract: Manohar Malgonkar's credentials as an Indian writer in English stem either from his ability to tell a rippling yarn or from his focus on historical settings. *The Devil's Wind* is a novel favourably revaluating Nana Saheb's role in the mutiny. It is a historical novel that tells the story of Nana Saheb, the heir of the last Peshwa of the Maratha Confederacy, who played a leading role in the 1857 war of Independence. It provides a portrait of a man whom the Britishers portrayed as a great villain and is based on historical sources as far as possible.

The most significant aspect of Manohar Malgonkar (1913-2010) is his creation of whole series of action oriented heroes. With them in the foreground, the history of the vast conglomeration of people in the sub-continent is captured alive. Before he took up fiction writing, he was already known as historian of the Maratha period.

The Devil's Wind deals with the story of Dhondu Pant Nana Saheb, the adopted son of Bajirao Peshwa II, the controversial figure of the historic Sepoy Revolt of 1857. Nana Saheb is a historical character and the novel is written in the auto-biographical style. According to the novelist, many accounts of Nana Saheb are already there, but all of them invariably paint him as "infamous, dastardly, despicable, crafty demon, barbarous butcher, and arch assassin. In England he replaced Napoleon Bonaparte as the hate object of a nation."¹ Malgonkar has attempted to right what he considers to be the usual twisted portrayal of Nana by the British historians. He observes "that the stories of Nana and the revolt have never been told from the Indian point of view."² In the interview to the *Ellsworth American*, the author tells the object and genesis of the book :

My book... is about the so called Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. All history of India is written from the British view. Nana Saheb, the leading figure of the 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 villain but as a rather mixed – up human being, like most of us are.³

Though the protagonist belongs to history and the choice of Nana Saheb as the central character limits it to a sort of political framework, the focus is on the attributes of Nana Saheb and Malgonkar's code of heroship gets reflected through the values of friendship, commitment, humanitarianism, loyalty, bravery, broadmindedness, honour, love, sense of duty, decency, patriotism and so on.

The novel presents the period of 1818 to 1880 and "the hero of the revolt Dhondur Pant Nana Saheb dramatically unfolds the bewildering feudal customs and traditions and the socio-political conditions prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century India, the high handedness of the Britishers (who had come to India as traders carrying cross in one hand, and sword in another), confrontation with them and subsequent disintegration of the Indian armed forces"⁴. The novel also presents the weak and divided Kings and Peshwas who had fallen from grace. Bajirao was the last of the Peshwas and the British had made him to renounce all claims to his heritage, for himself as well as for his successors, and never to return to his homeland and granted him a small territory as his domain, a small village on the right bank of the Ganges, Bithoor, near Kanpur and handsome pension of a hundred thousand pounds which satisfied him immensely. For he had " limitless leisure to enjoy life and the money to buy anything he wanted - anything except freedom which he did not seem to miss" (p.11) as he was amoral, coward, mean, cruel, vindictive, avaricious but religious and well read. Bajirao adopted Nana Saheb in 1827 at the age of three and influence his life more than any real father could have. To make up for his own lack of soldierly qualities, Bajirao made Nana learn different types of skills which a prince needs to know. In 1851, when Bajirao died and Nana Saheb took over at the age of twenty seven, the British discontinued the title and took away the territory and Nana had to restart life as an ordinary citizen. Nana wakes up to a full awareness of the misery of his situation when he finds that he, the Peshwa's heir, has no land to gift away as required by the terms of the mahadana he has to perform as part of the ritual of mourning. The offer of land by Vinchurkar, formerly a feudatory of the Peshwas, moves Nana to tears. Though he did not accept the offer and gave away money to Brahmins instead of land but Vinchurkar's gesture left a mark and Nana moved by the generosity of Vinchurkaris full of approbation :

I, who had little knowledge of what Bajirao had scuttled when he had run to the British merchants for protection, suddenly saw a glimpse of that other India, which, for all its turmoil and Misery had yet been a richer, nobler land (p.42).

Nana feels strongly about the slavish conditions in which Bajirao lived and feels, Bajirao had a chance “ to redeem himself, to live up to the illustrious name of the grandfather whose name he bore and who was India’s most talented military genius of all times”(p.9). Brought up as the adopted heir of Bajirao II, Nana inherits neither the rich kingdom nor the deplorable frailties of his father. But he seems to have been initiated into the brahminical fervor of non-violence by his father’s casual remarks in the fencing ground. This is only for self defence not for killing. Being Brahmins you may not take life. You can kill only in battle an enemy” (pp.14-15). He himself writes :

I myself, brought up as a vegetarian and a brahmin, to respect learning and culture, someone taught to believe that all life —human, animal, even insect life — was part of a great single divinity and therefore sacrosanct, had the vegetarian's instinctive squeamishness at the shedding of blood (p.75).

Nana regarded the obligations of friendship as important as those of patriotism and racial loyalty. "I could not, in my own mind, separate the national struggle from personal involvements" (p.115). He had many friends among the British, and he did not wish them to be made scapegoats for all the wrongs committed by the East India Company. "Could I now stand by and watch the men and women who had sung and danced and laughed in my house slaughtered by howling mobs? They had done no harm to me, or Indeed to India. Why should they have to be sacrificed for all the wrongs piled up by the East India Company over a hundred years?" (p.115) He feels his loyalties were "hopelessly intermixed" between patriotism and friendship and reveals his state of mind:

I fervently hoped that the carnage would not be excessive; that somehow, only just that number of white men would be slaughtered for the remainder to be persuaded that their best course was to leave our land for their own . And, to be sure, there were a number of Englishmen I would not have liked to leave our shores either: families such as the Wheelers and the Hillersdons and the Morelands, or the half-whites such as the Skinners and the Herseys. My loyalties were hopelessly intermixed, and my hatred far from pure (p.75).

Like Kiran Garud of Distant Drum, he flouts all barriers and prompted by his sense of friendship, he vouches incontrovertibly for personal ties even if it involves the breach of

pragmatic norms of political or rational behaviour and sends word to Wheeler before the attack and comments:

I sent him a word because I had promised to do so and I shall never admit that my love for his daughter had anything to do with it. Somehow it seemed important that the gesture be made before I became locked in as a part of the opposition. It was my last concession to a friendship I truly valued (p.150).

Nana could not overthrow his obligations as a friend. But at the same time his unflinching commitment to the cause of the country is stressed. Shyam M. Asnani comments: Nana Saheb later proves his loyalty to General Wheeler by gesturing an advance signal to him on the coming attack, at the cost of treason and disloyalty to his own men. But soon he joins the Sepoys in their common cause of Revolt and is proclaimed to be heir apparent to the Peshwa Rajgaddi.⁶ When the time comes, he rises to the occasion and takes up the leadership in the revolt against the British. He says:

Let me make it clear that even at the time I was, as I am now, wholly convinced that we were morally right. Ours was going to be an uprising against oppression, an attempt to drive out, the men who had come to our shores in the garb of traders, to buy and sell, and then, like some Arabian Nights pirates, taken out the weapons concealed in their cloaks and turned upon their hosts and made them slaves. In our struggle to take back what was ours, there was no room for a feeling of guilt. On a purely abstract level of thinking, even if we had to kill every single white man, woman and child in India in the course of our fight, morally we would still be justified (p.75).

On being asked by Hillersdon whether Nana would come out openly on their (British) side or not, he explains his position: "Once the sepoys here rebel, I have no choice. I shall join them. Not only that, but I shall work for them. But till such time as they do rebel, I am uncommitted. Till then I can go on helping friends" (p.136).

Nana has indomitable will to fight for the freedom of his country. In an open letter to Queen Victoria and her Government in India, he declares his resolve to continue his struggle. "All I want you to understand is that I am not a murderer," I wrote, "but at the same time you have no enemy more determined than myself. So long as I live, I shall fight" (p.267). The new Lieutenant Governor of Oudh declared Nana an outlaw because of

his "persistence in rebellion." In another letter, Nana questions: "What right have you to occupy India?" I demanded. "How can we accept the argument that you firanghis are the masters and we 'outlaws' in our own country?" (p.268)

Nana is human to the core. He has no personal grievances against the British. In a war there are bound to be killings but at the same time, Nana knows his duty, viz., "yield not to impotence" as the Geeta teaches, for in a war, people must die (p.116). He debates with himself: "Would it have been a surrender to impotence if someone had tried to save the women and children from being butchered?" (p.116) In the heart of his hearts he feels 'that somehow the war can be avoided.' A probe into his psyche reveals his state of mind:

I had fervently believed that I was going to be the voice of reason, the key man held in esteem by both sides, the mediator and the negotiator; someone who would go down in history as the man who had tempered a revolt, who had helped his own people to achieve freedom from foreign conquerors with only the minimal blood letting; the man, who, above all understood and practised old fashioned chivalry, for had he not given asylum to the women and children of the enemy? (pp 127.128)

After a good deal of brooding over the question of the rights and wrongs, Nana decides to escort the British families to Bithoor on the request of his collector friend Hillersdon. He tries to keep Kanpur unaffected by the revolt out of compassion for the innocent. One cannot, doubt his patriotism for all his affinity with the British families, His genuine intention to save the innocent people turns into incredibly foolish act as when the boats were ready to depart, something went wrong and someone started shooting. He forgot that those who had suffered a lot at the hands of the Britishers were bound to retaliate. The situation was beyond control and there was a large scale massacre on the river, Having learnt the news, Nana sent message to stop the killings and rushed to the spot. But, it was too late. The men were killed: The women and children were removed to Bibighar. Nana feels intense agony at the unforeseen horror.

I am sorry, I said to them, but without uttering a sound, This is not how I wanted it to end. Forgive me, I am sorry, Sorry, sorry, I have not saved your lives. I have compromised, borrowed a little time for some, perhaps saved a few, I don't know. I am sorry (p.189).

When Nana was camping at Maharajpur, the women and children held captive in Bibighar were slaughtered: The killings were suspected to have done by the butchers led by Hussaini Begam whose daughter had been burnt alive in the burning of Daryaganj. Nana laments:

Satichaura and Bibighar are monuments to our brutality. "Look and be ashamed," the world will forever admonish us. "This is what you have done. this is what you are capable of." So long as the sun and the moon go round, our noses will be rubbed in their dregs (p.207).

But at the same time he points out that these incidents were only retaliation against the savagery of the British column. "If Daryaganj and the other villages had not been burned down as guilty villages, Satichaura might never have happened; and if Fattepur had not been destroyed merely as a followthrough to a victorious military action, Bibigarh might never have happened" (p.207).

The British had taken pleasure in destroying villages only to create a sense of horror. Even Nana Saheb's palace at Bithoor was burnt down with women and children alive. In spite of Nana's humanitarian attitude towards the British, the British held him responsible for the senseless slaughter and painted him as a monster. To his astonishment, Nana finds the inscriptions by the side of the well and the Entrenchment affixing the responsibility of massacre on him. He argues that if he is held responsible for the massacres, Queen Victoria should be accused of all the atrocities committed by the British in her name,. No inquiry could prove. that Nana was present anywhere near Bibighar when the tragedy occurred nor he was present at the scene of Satichaura killing. The British had deliberately made him up into "a monster of ferocity" Nana Saheb explains:

... my being blown up into a "monster of ferocity" was a deliberate act. Our revolt had thrown up a surfeit of British heroes but no villains to balance them against, and they needed villainy of the requisite magnitude to serve as a backdrop for heroism. How hollow would Havelock's victories have seemed if I, Nana Saheb, had not been their principal objective! (p.241)

Moreover, the barbarities of Neill and Renaud committed on the innocent and the 'guilty' alike needed a cover and he, Nana, provided it⁷

Nana's persistent efforts to fight with the British reveal his patriotic fervor. In spite of his best strategy, he invariably loses the fights because of more powerful and wide-ranged

weapons of the British. Nana has no doubt that his is the right cause and would like to believe that victory will be his, but the harsh truth has to be faced. "The philosophy of Geeta might bring solace, but not victory. The right also had to have battalions and guns more powerful than its enemies; truth could never triumph merely because it was the truth, not unless it had resources greater than those possessed by untruth" (p.172). Added to this is the betrayal of his country men. "How could we win when our own people were fighting against us in ever-increasing numbers" (p.172). Disgust filled his mind "Slaves were assisting their masters to conquer their own motherland and thus perpetuate their slavery. No country would live down such degradation of its people — we deserved our fate" (p.232). However, everything was not lost, Nana kept trying to convince himself as "Tantya had escaped, taking away the bulk of his force; Mani, who was now the Rani of Jhansi, was carrying on the fight with the utmost determination: and Begam Hazrat Mahal, the Queen of Oudh, had gathered a large force and was daily offering provocations to the enemy" (p.218). There was still a good chance of the tide's turning. Nana takes false Jal-samadhi and disappears in Akbarpur, and from there to Charausi.

On hearing that Bithoor had been plundered and his house burned and being unable to find his family Nana toyed with the idea of death as there was nothing left to live for, neither person nor cause. He entertained the thought of ending his life wearing a royal dress and reciting: the gayatri mantra to get courage, when the troops belonging to the 43rd infantry, which were crossing over into Oudh, recognised him and extended their support and suddenly Nana Saheb rose from an ordinary fugitive to the stature of "the commander of an army five thousand strong" (p.229). Thereafter he organised numerous attacks against the British but he attained only 'nearness to victory' and never full victory. Soon, with the help of Tantya, who was back with his own force almost intact and with a half of Scindia's army, the territory west of Nawabganj was dominated but was defeated in the hands of Sir Colin Campbell, the Commander-in-Chief. The revolt had failed. Nana was a hunted man, an outlaw with the price on his head "a lakh of rupees — a hundred thousand! To any person who delivers Dhondu Pant Nana Saheb of Bithoor into British custody — or to any person who gives information that will lead to his arrest. A hundred thousand!" (p.241)

Nana takes shelter in Nepal and buys his free life with his precious Naulakha necklace, bidding his time to come back to India and fight again for the freedom of country. Nana, hibernating in Terai, heard the news of Tantya's execution. Balarao had died of the

dreadful Terai fever and Jung Bahadur wrote to the British Resident Colonel Ramsay that it was Nana who had died of Terai fever. It raised a controversy and the Britishers displayed pictures of Nana at all public places. Several fake Nana's appeared on the scene but were dismissed later. While all this was taking place, Nana was on his way to Malwan, a part in the heart of Maratha territory and finds fulfillment in the domestic bliss he finds in Eliza Wheeler's company.

This surely was Nirvana, a state of being freed from the coils of life. Once again there was a woman to love and a child to address him as father. As the leader of this small herd, I led a richer, more satisfying life than I had as the master of the wada at Bithoor or as the Emperor's short lived Peshwa (p.272).

The pattern we have here is the one we find at the end of A Bend in the Ganges, where Debidayal, the revolutionary, turns away from a life of violence and public concern and finds his peace in the love of a woman. The same pattern, less emphatically traced, is worked out in The Princes where Abhyaraj's marriage with Kamala becomes a meaningful relationship under the strain of public events that follow the merger of the state of Begwad. The Devil's Wind also presents Nana's unfortunate marriages which wither away under the potency of the curse he was born with and his fortunate discovery of sex and happiness through concubines, Champa and Azijan. Pretended impotency did not prevent his father from marrying him to another girl, Kashi. Nana, however, abstains from all physical relations with her to save her from the curse and "it was almost a master and slave relationship" (p.39) but later on like the Maharani of The Princes in her assertion of the right to live a full-blooded woman's life, she does not hesitate to become a mistress to Jung Bahadur and in confrontation with Nana Saheb, she rebuffs:

I want to be a woman, not merely a repressed freak. I want to live, to become a mother, to experience physical love, violent, abandoned. I want to be in the glitter of a great king's court, not in a hermitage. I'm past twenty and what else was there for me but the prospect of life long abstinence, to die before I even learned to live? (pp.259-60)

Nana feels annoyed at the idea of Kashi having her desires fulfilled by Jung Bahadur. However, his reason tells him that what Kashi has done is only the logical outcome.

It has been observed that the protagonist's innate decency, broadmindedness and humanitarianism is the product of this scholarship but his roots in the ancient culture, of which the Geeta is the essence, has endowed him with tolerance and courage to act. His informing the British of the date of the attack, may be attributed to his sense of honour — that a gentleman's word must be kept but he is not a coward and he wishes to die fighting for the freedom of India¹⁰

ENDNOTES

1. Manohar Malgonkar, The Devil's Wind, 'Author's Note' (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1972). All subsequent references to this novel are from this edition of the novel and the page numbers are given in brackets.
2. Manohar Malgonkar, The Devil's Wind, 'Author's Note'.
3. The Ellsworth American, November 12, 1970 as quoted by G.S. Amur in Manohar Malgonkar (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1973), p.123.
4. Shyam M. Asnani, "A Study of the Novels of Manohar Malgonkar," Critical Response to Indian English Fiction (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985), p.56.
5. M. Rajagopalachari, "A Study in the Quest for Fulfilment," The Novels of Manohar Malgonkar (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1989), pp.72-73.
6. Shyam M. Asnani, "A Study of the Novels of Manohar Malgonkar," Critical Response to Indian English Fiction, p.59.
7. G.S. Amur, Manohar Malgonkar (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann. 1973).p.130.
8. Ibid., p.131.
9. Ibid., p.126.
10. Indira Bhatt, Manohar Malgonkar - The Novelist (New Delhi: CreativePublishers, 1992), pp. 26-27.