

From bondage to Liberation: A Study of Gender and Oppression in Manohar Malgaonkar's the Princes

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the portrayal of women in the novel *The Princes* by Manohar Malgaonkar, focusing on the character of the Maharani and the concubines of the Maharaja. The novel is set in ancient India, it shows the secondary status of women have in society in ancient times, where their roles are primarily defined by the desires and decisions of men. Through the plight of Maharani who is a neglected wife and the concubines of the Maharaja like Bibi- bai, Amina Begam and Sherawathi, the novel reveals the themes of emotional isolation, societal oppression, silent suffering and the lack of agency granted to the women who belongs to royal household. While the male characters dominate the plot, the silent battles and the suffering of women throws the light on the broader issues of women's rights, marriage systems and social norms. In his novel the writer criticizes the tradition of limiting the women to duties duty and sacrifice, using the Maharani's desire for love as a symbol of resistance to the injustice of her situation. This paper examines how the novel depicts the struggles of suppression, societal expectations and the other issues related to the gender inequality that are still relevant today.

KEYWORDS: Women's suppression, Silent suffering, human bonds, extra-marital affairs, Secondary status and Human struggles.

Introduction

The Princes as the title itself suggests is about the Princes of an ancient India. Primarily, the novel is mainly the story of men. However there are few women characters in the novel. They play minor roles, Except the character of Maharani no woman is described in detail. Just like Maharajas of the past, Abhay's father has concubines like Bibi -bai , Amina begam and Sherawathi. They play minor roles in the novel and their suffering and pathetic condition touches our heart. Though there is no fault of them but still they have to suffer in their life. The novelist vividly portrays the oppressive reality faced by the Indian women 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 quote is in itself a big question mark on the Indian society of Pre-Independence era.

The condition of women including Maharani is very pathetic. Through their condition they exposed the secondary status of women have in society, as women they have no right to go against the word of man and they are of a lower class than men. In this novel the problems like extra marital affairs, women's

suppression, their suffering and the secondary status they have in society are powerful human struggles that are still exist.

The Plight of Maharani: suffering

Maharani is the only major female character in the novel. She of course, is the wife of Abhay's father the Maharaja- Hiroji. Initially, Maharani had been engaged to Ashokraj – the younger brother of the Maharaja. However when Ashokraj died in an accident, Maharani was condemned as a ill – footed woman. After that it was decided that Hiroji should marry a girl who has been affianced to Ashokraj, but Maharaja was not happy with this marriage because he wanted to marry the princess of Minnore. So, this was of course a marriage of compromise.

Maharani is very beautiful, clever and refined, yet she is left alone by her husband – Maharaja. She lives in a separate palace all alone. Her husband spends his days in administrative work and hunts and then spends nights with his concubines. She suffers alone. She is a silent sufferer, she has not revealed about her miserable life to anybody not even to her parents and family.

As a result of her loneliness, she finds another man. So, we can not blame her for developing a relationship with the palace officer – Abdulla Jan. As she herself tells Abhay that she is not a thing but made of flesh and blood. So, the Maharani is right in her place because how can a young and beautiful woman like herself spoil her life in seclusion?

Concubines of the Maharaja: Women's secondary status

The condition of women including the Maharani, is very pathetic and miserable. **Bibi-bai** is the first concubine of the Maharaja. She came in the life of Maharaja before his marriage not only this but she had a son from the Maharaja whose name is Charudutta. It is said that she had tried to poison Abhay for getting the property of the state for her son. So , Later on , Bibi bai was replaced by Amina begam.

The next female character in the novel is **Amina Begam**. She is the second concubine of the Maharaja. The Maharaja suspected Bibibai of causing danger to Abhay. So, he sent her to a distant old residence. Her place was filled by Amina begam. She was a Muslim dancing girl. The Maharaja had seen her in simla. He had paid twenty thousand rupees to the mother of Amina. She has brought with her Zarina specially for Abhay. However Amina begam too is neglected when Sherawathi is brought.

The next female character in the novel is **Sherawathi**. She is a South Indian girl and she was not as beautiful and refined as Maharani. Therefore , Abhay wondered that why his father accompanied these women though they were less charming and beautiful than his mother.

This is why Maharani is right in her place as at the end she breaks her relationship with Maharaja and decides to live with the palace officer – Abdulla Jan for the rest of her life.

Conclusion

In this way, In the novel *The Princes* Manohar Malgaonkar depicted his confrontation with love and bondage of social rules. The whole tradition where women stayed married, no matter how unhappy and confining their marriage was. So the novel throws light on the fact that in ancient times women were expected to stay in their marriages even if they were not happy at all. The writer portrays the struggles of a character caught between love and the rigid social rules of marriage. In this novel Maharani expresses her implicit desire for free selection of mates and criticizes the Indian marriage system. Malgaonkar depicted this social Change through the character of Maharani. Malgaonkar shows her powerful

personality for true womanhood, showing that women can stand up against the oppression and humiliation they face in the name of duty and sacrifice. Overall through the novel the writer throws light on the large social change that was happening in India at that time, where the old ways of thinking were being questioned and people were beginning to see the importance of Freedom and personal choice, particularly for women.

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