



**Ahimsa and its failure: A Psychoanalytic Study of Partition in
Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges***

Mohd Siddique Khan*

ORCID 0000-0002-6775-7572

Department of English and Modern European Languages, Lucknow University,
Lucknow, UP 226025 India

***Corresponding Author:** Mohd Siddique Khan, khansiddiq02@gmail.com

Department of English and Modern European Languages, Lucknow University,
Lucknow, UP 226025 India

Abstract

Aim: *My paper would study the shocking disparity between the two roles Ahimsa had to play. First being the political ideology, it managed to succeed whereas as a tool for spiritual transformation it failed miserably.*

Copyright © 2021 Society for Progressive Letters (SPL)

Methodology: *The paper will employ a psychoanalytical perspective to explore this dichotomy in both pre and post partitioned India in Manohar Malgonkar's A Bend in the Ganges.*

Outcome: *It is not sufficient to understand Ahimsa in a single dimension; its multifarious diversions add to it even more important than just a concept or a set of principles. The two major concerns in which Ahimsa was supposed to impact Indian life were: as a Political ideology and a spiritually animated way of life. The two kept overlapping and resuming distance from each other from time to time. While as a political ideology, it invariably emerged victorious whereas when it was the question of adopting Ahimsa intrinsically it was abandoned ruthlessly. Ahimsa was used as and made the most powerful tool in achieving political aims whereas the moment these aims seem to be achieved it remained no longer effective. Gandhian expectations from the newly Independent India were too high which had Ahimsa as the major working force but the results were completely atrocious and barbaric. My paper would bring conjectures on the possible explanations for the failure of Ahimsa as a way of life.*

Conclusion: *The paper will contend that the philosophy of Ahimsa worked hazardously on the psyche of Indian individuals. This will be put substantially in counter-narrative as to how the philosophy had adverse effects owing to its incompatibility to the political, social, and existential contexts of pre-partitioned India.*

Keywords

Aggression, Instinct, Group Behavior

Volume: 1 Issue: 2

Paper Type: Research Article

Article History: Received: June 25, 2021, Revised: July 10, 2021, Accepted: July 29, 2021

The paper can be accessed online on: <https://literaryherm.org>

The twofold character of Ahimsa and the dichotomy thus produced out of it must not be seen as a sheer criticism, rather it can be viewed in their respective concerns for constructive purposes. The paper does not intend to put questions on Gandhi's philosophy, his sincerity, or his understanding of Pre-Independence or post-Independence India. Neither it mocks at its failure nor urges the readers to disown and get disillusioned with Ahimsa. Far from these misinterpretations, the paper tries to unravel the contexts and the set of events, backgrounds, circumstances; both worldly and mental, which led to the failure of Ahimsa. As Bruce Wayne or Batman famously has been taught by his master Ra's al Ghul to "learn to mind your surroundings". By "surroundings" he didn't mean just the external reality. It was about the intersection and coupling of mind and the surrounding and how one must learn to practice one's principles not in isolation but in accordance with external circumstances. Gandhi as a father figure in one way or the other failed to teach the same to Indians. The apprehensions, however, were clear to him long before he happened to see his ideology of passive resistance failing at the backdrop of partition. Manohar Malgonkar takes Gandhi's words as the epigraph for the novel. He conjectures,

Can true, voluntary non-violence come out of this seeming forced non-violence of the weak? Is it not a futile experiment I am conducting? What if, when the fury bursts, not a man, woman, or child is safe and every man's hand is raised against his neighbor.

Gandhi was paving a way too idealistic and utopian for which the masses oppressed for hundreds of years were not ready. However, it would be an injustice to make him the culprit of the catastrophe. While presenting a critique on Gandhi's expectations this paper also tries to defend him in the light of psychoanalytical theories. More than the contradiction between idealism and realism it was something psychic as well. Certainly, unknown to Gandhi himself as a political romantic it would be ridiculous to ask why did he not try to understand human nature in the ideas of Freud and other contemporary theorists.

The argument I am trying to present here is that Ahimsa, in psychoanalysis, would acquire the status of an unnatural and undesirable force of repression. To understand this phenomenon, one needs to go through the Freudian understanding of certain other terms like Aggression, Group Behavior, etc. We may find in the due course that Ahimsa in a way becomes a potential threat to man's natural behavior and how all these psychic paradigms stand in direct opposition to the basic ideas of passive resistance. Explaining Freudian ideas on human instinct Dennen writes "there were two fundamental instinctual drives: the sexual drive (or libido) and the ego instinct for self-preservation." For a very long time, Freud and other theorists kept debating and changing their views about the basic nature of Aggression. What could be used here in our argument is that the basic consensus among them and Freud's own essays are that it is related to this 'instinct for self-preservation, although he denied the same in some of his essays as well. This can be further understood as a kind of defense mechanism to survive. Later, the idea was given an elaborate analysis and it was concluded by Fromm that there are "two independent sources, only one of which is instinctual. Instinctual aggression is benign and defensive; uninstinctual aggression, rooted in man's character, is malignant and destructive." From here, it is easy to see how the two forms of aggression were completely responsible for the massacre done

during the partition. While Ahimsa was an enlightened path, it also compelled the subject to behave unnaturally; it made one repress one's desire to be responsive to the dangers in any form. The same happened with Gian Talwar in the novel when he confronted the injustice done to his brother's murder. He was initially an avowed follower of Gandhi's doctrines. His belief was firm but amateur and he became a believer only out of his enthusiasm. Like many Indians, he just aligned himself with the bigger cause in a way plausible and reasonable but never brooded upon the profoundness of Ahimsa. Malgonkar describes Debi's unwillingness on giving up his foreign blazer to the fire.

The blazer, made of imported material, was his most elegant garment. Indeed, it was his most prized possession. As he clutched it to the chest, it felt soft and warm, like some furry animal. He felt a sudden desire to turn back, to fight down his irrational impulse, but it was already too late. The men crowding around the fire were making way for him, shouting encouragement.

In a way, it was a blind following for many Indians where the believer was not intellectual enough to understand the deeper purpose of Ahimsa. Gian himself could not explain being asked by Debi and his friend how passive struggle would bring Independence. The true test of his commitment to Ahimsa occurred when he got no justice for his brother's murder. Demmen refers to Freud's 'Civilization and its Discontents' (1930), and writes, "Freud noted that the analytic literature shows a predilection for the idea that any kind of frustration results in a heightening of the sense of guilt." He further quotes Freud where he says, "When an instinctual trend undergoes repression, its libidinal elements are turned into symptoms and its aggressive component into a sense of guilt". This sense of guilt was not just because of the injustice done to him but was intensified by his own tendency of adhering to the ideas for which he was intellectually incapable. This coupling of

his blind faith and inefficiency to reason became the origin of explosive aggression. Had he accepted the path of Ahimsa in a true sense he would not be so disillusioned. Had he not been in an impression that Ahimsa would create a Utopia he would be less disappointed. He felt betrayed by his understanding of the cause and killed the murderer in return, renouncing Ahimsa altogether. Ahimsa was also the path of keeping perpetual patience and courage to withstand the harsh laws of the system. Gandhi in Hind Swaraj writes:

Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms. When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul force. For instance, the Government of the day has passed a law that applies to me. I do not like it. If by using violence I force the Government to repeal the law, I am employing what may be termed body force. If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves the sacrifice of self.

The soul force of a person of ordinary physical and mental strength may retain existence and importance only under moderately harsh conditions. The conditions Malgonkar describes are beyond any imagination. He writes about the prison conditions "For months they had languished in little black cells infested with vermin, in the stench and filth of their excrement, in the foulness of their warder's and fellow prisoner's linguistic depravity;.....". Conditions leading to such dehumanization harm one's mental strength like nothing else, also working in the process of producing responsive aggression. Dennen writes:

In 1915, Freud had suggested that the frustration of behavior aimed at gaining pleasure or avoiding pain led to aggression. In 1939, this hypothesis was further developed by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer & Sears, who were interested in integrating the concepts

arising from learning theory and psychoanalysis. They proposed that the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression.

Frustration as such was a common experience to the people of pre-independence India. It, therefore, would not be wrong to assume that the everyday injustice, humiliating discrimination, exploitation, famine conditions, rampant arrests would have accumulated much of this aggression in an Indian psyche. Gian Talwar is a perfect example of a man with broken mental capacity. He renounced all his idealism, personal virtues and became an informer for the British officer Patrick Mulligan in Andaman Jails. The attempt here is to show that a common Indian gave in not just because he was dishonest but also for the conditions he faced every day. The weakness in character is an obvious consequence when the circumstances are so hostile. It shows a certain kind of essentialism on the part of Indians where there was less scope for anyone to attain the transcendentalism Gandhi's Ahimsa endorsed. Gian Talwar felt weak and reflected on his situation.

Was it youth that made him so shallow, he wondered, or was it a part of the Indian character itself? Did he in some way, represent the average Indian, mixed-up, shallow, and weak? Like someone even more confused, quite despicable, in fact, like that boy whose name he had forgotten, Rafi, that was it. Was he like Rafi? His non-violence had crumbled the moment it met a major test, now even his nationalism was wavering, ...

It was shocking and disgusting, how the essential humanity vanished and all the values, religious teachings, morality were ineffective during the riots in the partition. Reflecting on this from a psychoanalytical perspective, not only gives another glimpse of the reality but would also trace the latent but deeply rooted, naturally occurring hostility in humans. Dennen writes, "The truth is, he(Freud)

writes "that man are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked". It is from this understanding of the human psyche we come to believe that humans are more likely to dwell in a fight rather than living in peace. He writes further:

....a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment. The result is that their neighbor is to them not only a possible helper or sexual object but also a temptation to them to gratify their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him.

This explains to some extent why the people living for years in the same regions and villages, turned against each other when the time of crisis occurred. Malgonkar's narrative is as ruthless as any other partition novel. He writes, "the most barbaric cruelties of primitive man prevailed over all other human attributes.Mobs ruled the streets, burning, looting, killing dishonoring women and mutilating children; even animals sacred to the other community became the legitimate targets of reprisals." It is certainly subjected to the situation like wars and riots when a man is not just a man but a "homo homini lupus" i.e "A man is a wolf to another man". He further talks about the criticality of the situation when men react like this; this destructive malice felt by one man for the other needs a little push. He further quotes Freud according to whom, "This aggressive cruelty usually lies in wait for some provocation,...." The riots following the partition were this provocation that unleashed the wolf. Not only to the philosophy of Ahimsa but the discovery of this malignant force within the society also dismantle all the doctrines in scriptures and social theories which call for the inherent goodness of man and society. Demmen continues with Freud and quotes:

Civilized society is perpetually menaced with disintegration through this primary hostility of men towards one another. Their interests in their common work would not hold them together; the passions of instinct are stronger than reasoned interests.

The provocation to the mob ready to loot and kill is again an important factor and is required to be studied. How an individual behaves in a group will manifest the destructive transformation one goes through under such repulsive circumstances. One is not the same and loses one's individuality. Ahimsa is a matter of an individual's strength; one's strength of character, discretion, patience, endurance. One who is at peace with himself, one who is not confused and could see things clearly may be the one who would not give up Ahimsa easily, while it is extremely difficult to retain such strength when you are part of a malicious and hateful group. The rhetoric of such groups comes not just with passion but validity as well. The validity is given by the number, majority, magnitude, etc assures the subject for his actions. It is very obvious from the basic psychoanalytical model that one is less likely to commit a crime if one's threatened by society's condemnation. This is what we call in Freudian terminology superego. All the wild impulses, silently hibernating in the mind's corner would be kindled if there is no superego in terms of constraints put by one's society or community. Moreover, if the community legitimizes the violence, an individual would revel in such acts. Demmen further quotes Freud writing about the ideas by Gustave Le Bon:

In 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' (1920) Freud referred to a book by a French physician and social psychologist, Gustave Le Bon, *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895). Le Bon's main thesis is that when man becomes a part of a group he regresses to a primitive mental state. Acting as an individual, he may be cultivated and rational; acting in a group, he may behave

like a barbarian, be prone to violence, abandon his critical sense, become emotional, and lose all his moral standards and inhibitions. His unique, individual features disappear, and the common ancestral heritage in man's unconscious becomes dominant.

From here we can take the other Gandhian principle: Swaraj, as well. Swaraj and Ahimsa are complementary to each other. The success of one depends on the other. The idea of Swaraj is not to be taken literally but it delves deeper to incorporate other meanings as well. "the word Swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint"; hence, more than asserting one's right to rule one's nation it's about to rule oneself. The basic independence, therefore, is to achieve spiritual freedom upon which political freedom is based. Achieving Swaraj is to transform an individual into a spiritual being. Hence, it poses no opposition in saying that both Ahimsa and Swaraj are concerned with an individual and his self in the first place. But in a situation like war and riots an individual loses one's will and discretion and acts according to the group. He feels one with the group; he feels secure and just in doing what others will be doing. He feels an obligation to be loyal to the group. This group tendency is shown in the last chapter of the novel where a group stops the train coming from India. They began an investigation of finding Hindus. One of the fellow passengers revealed who among them are Hindus. This, more than the individual malice is the impact of group behavior.

One of the other psychic paradigms that impaired the rational fabric of the nation was the uncertain and unsecured future. Malgonkar gave a very penetrating glimpse of the fear that was common on both sides. Shafi and Hafiz, members of the Hanuman club which stood for the revolution carried jointly by Hindus and Muslims, dwelled in a shocking conversation. Hafiz tried to plead with Shafi and threatened him about the future.

That is exactly what we have to prepare ourselves for: a civil war. We have to think ahead, a year, two years from now, to a time when the British will leave this country, leaving your fate in the hands of the Hindus. Are we to sit back and take whatever indignities they have in store for us? We must hit back tenfold. It is to that end that we must all work, must all recognize the new enemies; the Hindus! There was the same kind of fear among Hindus as well. The conversation between Debi and Basu is again presuming the perils hovering over their heads. He projects the same fear.

Isn't it clear as daylight? The moment the British quit, there will be civil war in the country, a great slaughter. Every city, every village, every bustee, where the two communities live side by side, will be the scene of the war. Both the sides are preparing for it, the Hindus and the Muslims."

Basu also revealed that "this is what made me join the Mahasabha, parole or no parole. I could not keep out. We have to become aligned, in sheer self-defense. Hindus against Muslims." Again, the philosophy of Ahimsa could not devise a way to resolve this chaos. Ahimsa as a political ideology delivered the expected result but the other side of the coin was too powerful for an ideology like this. The same idealism disillusioned the masses and it made them anxious. There was, with Ahimsa, needed a realistic, practical, and alternative strategy to fight the perils of partition. In the absence of any pragmatic strategy or in other words in the presence of a strategy(Ahimsa) that was visibly inefficient, a common man felt perturbed, confused, and anxious. This pattern can be studied in psychoanalysis as Anxiety. Demmen quotes Monroe describing this, "it is part of a broad evolutionary patterning which appears spontaneously under a variety of threatening conditions." This fear is destructive in the sense that this is "the type of behavior, resulting in looks aggressive and often has a kind of spontaneous cruelty beyond justifiable defensive reaction." Had there been no prior threats and

insecurities it could be said there would have been less violence. Anxiety fallen on an already oppressed man, in psychoanalytical paradigms would turn him more violent. All in all the tenets of Ahimsa, it is clear, were not applicable in a situation like partition. But the weakness doesn't lie only in the philosophy but the man as well. Therefore, to forsake the ideology of Ahimsa is not advised anywhere in the paper but the attempt had been to show how the partition got in the way giving it a serious setback.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Dennen, J. M. G. V. D. "Theories of Aggression: Psychoanalytic theories of aggression." Default Journal, University of Groningen, 2005.
- Freud, Sigmund. "On Narcissism". A collection of Essays by Sigmund Freud. Orient Longman, 2001.
- "Instincts and their Vicissitudes".
- "Beyond the Pleasure Principle".
- "Mourning and Melancholia".
- Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Navjivan Publishing House, 2004.
- Hajari, Nisid. *Midnight's Furies*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.
- Kudaisya, Gyanes. *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*. Routledge, 2001
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-54. Trans, John Forrester*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Ecritus: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Tavistock Publications, 1997.
- "Some Reflections on the Ego", Int. J. Psycho-Anal., vol,34, 1953.
- Malgonkar, Manohar. *A Bend in the Ganges*. India Ink, 2009.
- Panigrahi, D.N. *India's Partition: The Story of Imperialism in Retreat(British and Foreign and Colonial Policy)*. Routledge, 2004.

Mohd Siddique Khan

Mohd Siddique Khan is an Assistant Professor at Integral University, Lucknow. He teaches British Literature, Indian Writing in English, and Literary Theories. He's also currently working on his Ph.D. from Lucknow University. While being

a Cosmopolitan at heart, he was born and brought up in Lucknow and he is a proud follower of North Indian cultural values. He is a thinker, littérateur, and movie lover but more than anything he is a humanist.