

Colonial Influence on Gujarati Novel: A Study of Nandshankar Mehta's Novel *Karan Ghelo*

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The opening lines of the novel '*A Tale of Two Cities*' by Charles Dickens seem pertinent to begin this paper-

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (1)

This novel was published in 1859 and it describes perfectly the essence of the Victorian period which lasted till 1901. The feeling that 'anything is possible' was felt optimistically and tragically. It was the time when the Industrial Revolution in England was at its peak, on top of that Railways were invented which boosted the already booming economy of England and emerged as one of the strongest nations in the world and had occupied nearly one-quarter of the world. But this also had another side. Along with progress, Industrialization brought in child labour, exploitation, and cruel treatment of workers. The advent and impact of machines were so great that they gradually converted man into a profit or loss entity.

Besides, the age was also an age of inventions, scientific discoveries, and innovations. The invention of the telephone, electricity, railways, sewing machines, X-ray, the telegraph, anaesthesia, antiseptic, and many

more happened during this age. Many fundamental laws of chemistry and physics were too developed in those times. But alongside that, this faith in science led to a loss of faith in religion. The emphasis on logic and reason led to a withdrawal of faith and trust in religion. The hardest blow was Charles Darwin's work '*On the Origin of Species*' which led to a severe clash between science and religion.

Our country, India, too was colonized during those times, and so along with the officers, the scientific developments and inventions, their morals, values, and literature reached us. During those times we were divided majorly into two groups. One was, who were English educated and who supported the new, modern western ideas and rejected almost blindly the traditional, while the second group rejected the modern and believed in the traditional culture and norms, though we see both these distinct categories overcoming their rigidness and blending into one that accepted that which is good and rejected that which was bad for them and their culture but it all happened gradually. So, with the arrival of their literature, naturally, there was a desire to imitate them and produce one just like them, and the novel being the dominant literary form of those times was attempted to be written the most. The first Indian novel in English was *Rajmohan's Wife* published in 1864 by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. Before that writing novels in regional languages had begun and the first novel written in Gujarati was *Karan Ghelo* by 'Nandshankar Mehta' published in 1866.

The colonial influence can be seen in the novel and with that some conflict in the writer about whether to glorify the traditional culture or to promote Western values. This conflict can also be interpreted as a safety measure taken by the writer to avoid hurting the sentiments of the people including the groups mentioned before.

'Colonial influence' in the simplest sense means the effect and impact on a region's people due to the presence of the colonizers and extending this on the phrase it means that the impact and effect of the British who, at that time were here for almost 250 years, and that of the western education introduced by them on the writer's thoughts and his work.

Nandshankar Mehta was born in Surat and was sent to an English medium school at the age of ten and then he became the first Indian headmaster of the same school. In the school, he was the protégé of Mr. Green (the then headmaster). He was closely associated with Mr. Russell, a British administrator and he wrote the novel with his motivation. In fact, it was the English education or the availability of authentic English texts that allowed him to write perhaps the first prose narrative in Gujarat. This is an evidence of the colonial influence the writer had in his life.

It is also interesting to note that the first novel written in Gujarati which would be leading the others, Nandshankar chose to write, not about one of the great Rajput kings of Gujarat like Mulraj or Siddharaj but about a man who had failed his land and his people. According to his son and biographer Vinayak Mehta, Nandshankar decided to write a historical novel which would focus on a pivotal moment in the history of Gujarat, a moment that signalled the end of one period of history and the dawn of another. He had considered writing on three topics; one was the story of Karan Vaghela then one was the destruction of Somnath or the fall of Champaner.

Sitanshu Yashaschandra, a renowned scholar and poet writes in his essay ‘From Hemachandracharya to Hind Swaraj’:

He chose from among three possible options: the defeat and death of Karan Vaghela, the last Hindu king of Gujarat; the defeat and downfall of Patai Raval, the Hindu king of Champaner, at the hands of Muhammad Begdo; and the destruction of the Somnath temple by Muhammad Ghazni. Karan was destroyed, the novel tells us, because of his moral, and especially sexual, degradation. He lusted after the wife of his minister, Madhav. Patai was also morally degraded, especially sexually: he had lusted after the goddess Kali of the Pavagadh Hills. A pre-nineteenth-century *garbo* (a lyrical narrative) on Patai Raval’s destruction was quite well known in Nandashankar’s time. That *garbo* gave a religious context to the Patai Raval theme. One wonders if Mastersaheb had any discussion

with Russell on the relative merits of the story of Patai, with its religious (rather than political) context, though it, too, told of the moral and sexual corruption of a Hindu king.

In the third theme under consideration, that of the destruction of the Somnath temple, there is no spectacular moral and sexual debasement that might have justified the defeat of the Chaulukya king. No causal connection is made between defeat and destruction, on one hand, and moral collapse on the other. But if the story fails to justify political defeat, it also fails to justify political victory. The story of Karan Vaghela, on the other hand, unfolds without any religious complications and shows neatly that the natives deserved to be defeated because they were morally corrupt.” (Yashaschandra 598)

The emphasis was, thus, on three things. First, there has to be a causal connection between defeat and destruction and the resultant moral collapse. Second, the focus is on the political context rather than the religious context because otherwise the story of Patai Raval was equally good and could have been helpful for the natives of those times. Third, the writer in justifying the political defeat of a ruler also justifies the political victory of another. Thus, indirectly, by extension, he is justifying the presence of colonial rule.

But before interpreting it to be a biased account it should also be taken into account that it is a story about a sexually and morally corrupt King, in which he falls asleep listening to religious recitations like, “Halfway through this recital, yawn after yawn escaped from Karan Raja, and thanks to the burning heat of the October sun assisted by the king’s own habit of taking a nap, the Raja never learnt how much Bhartihari and Vikramaditya went on to become famous when the bard and Brahmin let him enjoy his rest in peace” (Ghelo 23).

Or the lust he felt for his minister Madhav’s wife Roopsundari, “It was as if lightning had struck the king, ‘Madhav’s wife?’ he said in a shocked voice. ‘Our Madhav’s wife? A swan married to that crow? Is that a fact? You’re not lying to me? A woman fit to live in Indra’s heaven, a

woman who should light up the palace, such a woman is the wife of a miserable Brahmin? (Ghelo 29).

The king was calling the same minister who had helped him immensely to become a king a miserable Brahmin and a crow. So, this type of explicit description could not have been possible in a monarch's reign. This freedom to write about the corruptness and degradation of monarchs, the conflict of the religions was possible only because of the presence of British Raj. The break from the tradition of praising the king in the court could have happened because of the colonial rule.

The effect of western education is also evident throughout the text, especially that of English literary texts like the plays of Shakespeare in which the use of supernatural elements is seen. The use of supernatural elements can be seen in the novel *Karan Ghelo*. In the second chapter we see the king's encounter with female souls just like Macbeth encounters the witches and like in Macbeth, the female spirits also advised to Karan. They said,

Maharaj, we do not possess much knowledge of the future. But since you have been so obliging, we will give you a piece of advice: As you know, women have been the cause of great upheavals in this world. Because Ravan abducted Sita, Lanka was destroyed and Ravan himself killed. The battle of Kurukshetra occurred because Duryodhan had Draupadi's garments stripped from her in full view of the assembly, and in the course of the battle not only the Kauravas, but the Pandavas and crores of their supporters also lost their lives. So beware, O king! Be wary of your dealings with women and have as little to do with them as possible. (Ghelo 29)

So, this giving of advice and the King's choosing not to follow it gives it a similar structure like Julius Caesar and Macbeth and places it in the trope of the doomed king. But on asking their identity the female spirits replied, "Rajadhiraj, we were once the wives of Brahmins and merchants, but all of us died in childbirth. Our husbands married again and did not bother to perform the death rituals for us, which is why we are in this unfortunate state. O Raja, we beseech you to make them perform the

necessary Narayanbali sacrifice, and free us from this limbo” (Ghelo 195).

The spirits being the wives of Brahmins and merchants and requesting the king to perform Narayanbali gives it an Indian context showing that the writer was influenced by Shakespeare but he had adopted the Indian thought while portraying the supernatural elements. This Indian adaptation of supernatural elements is present throughout the book like the appearance of Madhav’s brother – in - law Keshav’s appearance as Babrobhoot after his murder by the King’s men, then Harpal’s, King’s cousin, meeting with an apsara and later becoming his wife. Another instance was king of Devgad, Devaldevi and their troops meeting Devaldevi’s destiny towards the end of the book.

Thus, the supernatural elements are prevalent throughout the book.

The Western education’s influence can also be seen in the writer’s views on child marriage. He compares Indian culture with other cultures and says that, “A study of other cultures makes it clear that in societies where child marriages are not prevalent, girls do not allow themselves to be meekly led like dumb cattle into matrimony. In societies where marriage is not looked upon as a form of barter. . .” (Ghelo 196).

The phrase ‘meekly led like dumb cattle into matrimony’ and marriage considered as a ‘barter’, shows the writer’s condemnation of the child marriages prevalent in the Indian societies in those times. He further says, “In a country where child marriages are the rule, duty triumphs over love. Where the relationship is that of worshipper and worshipped, where the woman’s role is limited to the propagation of the family, the shouldering of domestic burdens and the raising of children; where a deceased wife is only mourned for the loss of her domestic services and a home bereft of comforts; where the widower’s thoughts race towards remarriage. . .” (Ghelo 176).

This shows the writer’s progressive views towards women. The writer knows how society treats women so he emphasizes a marriage of love rather than duty. The progressive view of women can also be seen

during the reunion of Madhav and his wife Roopsundari, who was kidnapped by the King. During those times after a woman spends a night in another man's house alone, she is considered impure and even her husband doesn't touch her but in the novel the writer writes,

“Roopsundari was united with Madhav. The two embraced laughing and weeping with joy. . . . He was fully aware that Roopsundari had no role to play in her abduction. The separation had not lessened his love for her; on the contrary his desire to rescue her and take revenge on her captor had only increased its intensity . . . when Roopsundari embraced him as passionately as before, his joy knew no bounds. . . . The rituals were duly performed, the brahmins were paid their fees, and with no further impediments remaining, Madhav and Roopsundari resumed their lives as man and wife.” (Ghelo 195)

Nandshankar didn't write more about the rituals, just that they were done and Madhav and Roopsundari started their life again. This shows that the writer doesn't consider the rituals so important in the given situation, reflecting his progressive views. Then the writer also gives a view on marriage favourable to him and he talks about marriage saying that marriages that take place with the willing consent of both the partners and their families are ideal.

This idea of consensual marriage is also something which was not prevalent in those times. Then he states an ideal situation in which a young man with an humble background falls in love with a wealthy maiden but waits until he gains economic and social status before he asks for her hand in marriage.

This idea of being deserving of the beloved, the typical rags to riches plot, and the character working hard due to the influence of the beloved (the reformed rake character archetype), these tropes and character archetypes were prevalent in Victorian literature as these weren't the dominant Indian thoughts.

Then some instances which show the writer's study of Western texts are-

- a) During the time when Madhav is repenting his deed of betraying his motherland, the writer says,

A study of world history shows that Madhav was not alone in acting this way. In ancient times, Vortigern invited the Saxons from Germany to invade Britain, and Count Julian of Spain had welcomed the Muslim General Musa of Africa for the same reason as Madhav's. (Ghelo 169)

- b) While describing the beauty of the chief queen Kaularani of the King Karan he says,

She was as beautiful as the women imagined by portrait painters, as ethereal as the figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, created by the great Italian artists, as bewitching as the images of women dreamed up in the imagination of the world's finest poets. (Ghelo 266-67)

- c) While describing village life he says,

(the air) at times was overladen by the stench of filth created by man's carelessness and indifference. In front of every house stood a rubbish dump, overflowing with garbage. This poisonous heap of animal droppings, rotting food and other waste emanated deadly vapours and was the cause of innumerable diseases and the short life spans of the villagers. But these simple folk were totally unaware of this. They spent their days in happy ignorance, surrendering themselves to their fate, accepting all that befell them as the will of god; little realizing that the untimely deaths of parents, children, spouses and relatives was often due to their foul surroundings; and that it was their own hands to keep death at bay. (Ghelo 43)

So, this knowledge of world history, the Bible, Italian painters, and criticizing rural sides' unhygienic environment is the knowledge gained from the colonial education imparted by British in India.

Regarding the sati tradition, the writer, Nandshankar being a social and religious reformer, is against it as when after Keshav's death, his wife,

Gunsundari's mother is thinking of what to say to her daughter, we see her trying to reach a conclusion and her major part of the consideration is of what will the people say? On one hand, her widowed daughter's presence 'would scorch the family like a red-hot brazier' but despite the shame 'her daughter, dearer to her than life, would be there with her and bring comfort to her heart. She would be there to advise her, keep her company and help her in the housework. And a widowed daughter would prove invaluable in her old age, to nurse and take care of her when she was feeble and bedridden. Time is a great healer and a young girl's grief will lessen; and a daughter, even though widowed, is a daughter after all, whose presence brings joy to her parents' (Ghelo 43).

Thus in Gunsundari's mother's thinking we can find Nandshankar Mehta arguing against the Sati tradition but one has to keep in mind that the thoughts are of a widowed daughter's mother and the time when the novel is placed and the time when it was written, a girl who did not immolate herself after her husband's death was considered a bad omen. So, the writer takes safe stand and in the next instant her mother thinks,

On the other hand, how wonderful to have a daughter become a sati! Gunsundari's fame would spread not only in the town but throughout the whole Gujarat. She would bring renown to her community, increase the prestige of her family, and her parents would be considered fortunate by all. Moreover, as the shastras said, her deed would bring salvation for herself and her husband, and the gods would rejoice. (Ghelo 44)

Thus, we can see that the arguments against committing Sati are personal and emotional while the ones in favour are social and religious. Then when Gunsundari's mother asks her not to immolate herself and live, Gunsundari replies, "Live? How can I, a wretch, remain alive when my beloved husband who had made me his own; with whom I had hoped to spend my days both in happiness and in sorrow...deserted me by his untimely death? . . . I will follow him wherever he goes and share whatever fate has ordained for him. . . . Should I obstruct the progress of his soul and deny it everlasting bliss. . ." she says (Ghelo 47).

Here too Gunsundari's decision is based on two elements-

- a) Social- Looking at her arguments to commit Sati, we can see that those arguments show a deeply rooted patriarchal mindset, the sense that a woman doesn't have her own existence without a husband and that she should follow him wherever he goes, even death.
- b) Religion- The second argument she gives is religious which shows a blind following of religion of those times.

These reasons also suggest a lack of personal identity of women of those times. Not a single argument of Gunsundari contains a personal sentiment. All the arguments show an obligation, a responsibility which she should fulfil and hence immolate herself.

Nandshankar, while describing the atmosphere during the performance of the act of Sati tries to present a picture which appears breathtaking and unearthly. It succeeds in creating a feeling of wonder and mystery.

Now the sati was eager to join her husband. She entered the wooden structure, cradled her husband's head in her lap, and gestured to the Brahmins to proceed. . . . Screams of Jai Ambe! Jai Ambe! Pierced the din. The frenzy reached horrifying proportions, impossible to describe. Not a single cry escaped Gunsundari as her youthful body was crushed under the collapsing roof and she and her husband were enveloped by flames. Their mortal remains dissolved into the elements, leaving their souls to be judged before the king of kings. (Ghelo 235-36)

Apart from all these, knowing well the influence of colonial education and values on the writer, we find some dissent regarding the condition of the country, but the writer doesn't explain it nor give any reasons for his dissatisfaction. It is seen when Karan decided to go to war for the second time to protect his daughter Devaldevi and sent messengers to all his former vassals, several chieftains arrived with their contingents, even though Karan wasn't a king anymore, some 5000 Rajputs arrived to help him.

‘What motivated them to come? It was nothing but love for their king, pride in their motherland and the passionate desire to protect their country. Alas, such courage is no longer to be found in our land! And it is for this reason that our people are no longer free.’ (Gandhi)

This last statement is important because it is coming from a writer who had a tremendous colonial influence on his life and yet he feels and longs for freedom where the British do not rule them.

But this desire is still immature, and Gandhi led it to maturity in his book *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909. In it, Gandhiji says that the problem is not the British but the modern civilization, which we have to free ourselves from. For Gandhi, being free from the British meant English rule without Englishman, that is to have tiger’s nature but not the tiger and make India English. Gandhi says, “It is my deliberate opinion that India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization” (Gandhi 33).

According to Gandhi, The British parliament along with the Railways, Lawyers, and Doctors are all harmful to society. They, instead of helping the nation, increase its troubles. For Parliament Gandhi says, “Its work should be so smooth that its effects would be more apparent day by day. . . . It is generally acknowledged that the members are hypocritical and selfish. Each thinks of his own little interest. It is fear that is the guiding motive. What is done today may be undone tomorrow. It is not possible to recall a single instance in which finality can be predicted for its work” (Gandhi 30).

Gandhi is of the opinion that modern civilization is even eating into the vitals of the English nation so it must be shunned and the parliaments which represent this civilizations are, in reality, ‘emblems of slavery.’ When Railways were introduced in India, many were of the opinion that it gave India a new united spirit of nationalism but Gandhi never believed India to be divided in the first place he says, “We were one nation before they came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same” (Gandhi 63).

It was the railway, without which the English couldn't have such a hold on India as they had. Then for lawyers, he says that instead of solving the quarrels, they increase them as their whole profession runs on quarrels. And doctors make us careless of our bodies and that in the long term results in a loss of control over the mind. Thus the goal for Gandhi is not only to be free from the British but from the modern civilization also.

Nandshankar Mehta's context of courage is in fighting wars of arms but Gandhi's courage is totally different from the violent courage. For Gandhi the means and the end are connected so if one uses brute force as a means in the end he too would be opposed with the same means and that will solve no quarrels neither will it give any solutions but increase more problems.

So, Gandhi insists on using Passive resistance which is the sacrifice of self. He calls it reverse of resistance by arms to him it simply means," When we do not like certain laws, we do not break the heads of law-givers but we suffer and do not submit to the laws" (Gandhi 34).

Another major element found In *Karan Ghelo* is the conflict between Hindu and Muslims, the cruelties inflicted by both against each other and the corruption of religion. Especially the Hindu-Muslim conflict continues for so long even in the present but Gandhi, here too differs and says (regarding the cruelties both inflict on each other),

. . . the cruelties are not part of religion although they have been practiced in its name; therefore there is no aftermath to these cruelties. They will happen so long as there are to be found ignorant and credulous people. But there is no end to the victims destroyed in the fire of civilization. Its deadly effect is that people come under its scorching flames believing it to be all good. They become utterly irreligious and, in reality, derive little advantage from the world. Civilization is like a mouse gnawing while it is soothing us. When its full effect is realized, we shall see that religious superstition is harmless compared to that of modern civilization. . . . (Gandhi 37)

In this way, Gandhi turns the wars and quarrels fought in the name of religion on humans' ignorance implying evil is not in the religion but in one's own self which should be removed and it can be removed by religion. Thus after this literature, especially Gujarati literature acquired new dimensions. It was the beginning of literature infused with the spirit of nationalism, concern for the downtrodden, and humanism. Much was written about the downtrodden in quite a revolutionary spirit.

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