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The Themes of Conflict and Violence in Vishram Bedekar's *Ranaangan*

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The theme of conflict and violence in Vishram Bedekar's *Ranaangan* Abstract This article aims to study the Vishram Bedekar's novel *Ranaangan* with the objective of examining the effects of anti-Semitism in Germany and in rest of the world. The effects examined are from the diegetic world of the novel. However, as the novel is situated in the traumatic historical episode of Second World War, an attempt to find the source, of the mentioned effects, in the history will be made. Thus, the source of typology of the misfortunes presented in the novel will be found outside the novel itself.

ABSTRACT

This article aims to study Vishram Bedekar's novel Ranaangan with the objective of examining the effects of anti-Semitism in Germany and in the rest of the world. The effects examined are from the diegetic world of the novel. However, as the novel is situated in the traumatic historical episode of Second World War, an attempt to find the source, of the mentioned effects, in the history will be made. Thus, the source of typology of the misfortunes presented in the novel will be found outside the novel itself. An attempt will also be made to see the existence of any possibility of reconciliation between the individual belonging to enemy countries despite being friends in their personal life.

KEYWORDS

Anti-Semitism, Historical Fiction, Ranaangan, Extermination, Conflict, Violence.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against German Jews during Second World War and their subsequent sufferings have been depicted by many literary figures. Although India was hardly direct witness of the violence against the German Jews, literatures of India do not fail to demonstrate their empathy towards the victims of violence and extermination. Marathi literature is no exception. In this article, I propose to study the theme of violence towards Jews as presented in Marathi novel *Ranaangan* (1939) by Vishram Bedekar. Not only the story of the novel takes place on the eve of the Second World War but its very publication is during the same period. This novel depicts the social conditions of German Jews, not only inside Germany but also out of it. It is often noticed the violence depicted is in the form of physical torcher of which

the source is outside the victims. It is to problematize that whether violence can be reduced to its physical aspect. This article attempts to study the violence due to the external conflict that the Jews were facing. The term 'external conflict' is suggestive of the violence against the Jews due to anti-Semitism. However, as said earlier that it would be inappropriate to reduce violence to the conflicts in the external world, this article would also take into account the inner conflict of the individuals. The term 'inner conflict' attempts to depict the conflict within i.e. inside the mind of the individuals. Thus not only physical aspect of the violence will be discussed but also traumatic psychological violence will also be examined in the article. Both these aspects of the violence are seen in the character of Hertha, an exterminated Jewish woman during the War. Yashodhara Maitra Deshpande, translator of *Ranaangan*, tells us in her translation *Battleground* that she sees several kind of conflicts in the novel.¹ These conflicts are very violent.. The hatred against the Jews does not allow love between Hertha and Chakradhar, another character in the novel, to bloom despite the fact that this latter character is Indian and has hardly to do with anti-Semitism. This allows equally to study the position of India *vis-à-vis* anti-Semitism. The socio-political disorder during the War allows us to demonstrate and prove the impossibility of the convergence or reconciliation in the conflictual situation as presented in the novel. With the objective of studying the socio-political sentiment towards Jews during the period of the war in the real world as well as in the diegetic world of the novel I propose to divide this article in two parts viz. 1. External conflict : Origin of violence, 2. Inner Conflict : Imprisonment and Liberation

Methodology

The methodology we would be using is a descriptive method wherein the documents and books on history would be referred to understand the conditions in the external world during the period of the War. Then I propose to locate such conditions in the diegetic world of the novel. The typology of the fictional world as found in novel has to be found outside it in the real world. Consequently, the first part of the article shall attempt to examine the anti-Semitism in Germany and the conflict and violence caused by the War. The second part shall discuss the crises which the Jews encountered in the face of anti-Semitism. This part shall also take into account the life of the Jewish character, Hertha, as depicted in the novel. This part is also proposed to discuss the socio-political conditions in India which play a role of catalyst in the death of the Jewish character thereby reinforcing the impossibility of reconciliation as discussed in the introduction. It will be noticed that this impossibility is confirmed vigorously due to the denial for refuge to Hertha in India.

External Conflict : Origins of Violence

One of the main traumatic events of the Second World War includes the extermination of Jews from Germany forced by the ideology of anti-Semitism. Hitler reached the height of cruelty with the Holocaust. The genesis of the idea of anti-Semitism can be traced back to the period of Jesus Christ when the Jews were blamed and held responsible for killing him. Since then, the Jews were persecuted under the Christian rule for not accepting the dominant religion i.e. Christianity. In the Middle Ages the church took over the task of giving anti-Jewish 'sermons' where it can be arguably noticed that the Jewish were considered as devil as writes Daniel Jonah Goldhagen.

*(...) as it gradually developed by the thirteenth century to the point where the Jew became synonymous with the Devil. (...) the church disseminated through its representatives, its bishops, and most important its parish priest, its views of Jews, creating a universal and relatively uniform, pan-European cognition about Jews, in which the Jews were, as creatures of the Devil, considered to be barely human, if human at all.*²

Such hatred continues to incite the expulsion of Jews from Europe during Second World War. The novel *Ranaangan* (Trans. *Battleground*) presents Jewish lives in the face of this extermination. "And then all hell broke loose! Our homes were destroyed, our dreams reduced to dust. Contempt, insults, torture and oppression – all heaped mercilessly on us."³, says Hertha, the Jewish protagonist of the novel and the victim of the violence due to anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitic Germans were to be found in all the strata of the society. A

question arises here that how this hatred against the Jews spread that the entire non-Jewish population began to drive the Jews out of the country, began to torture them and even to kill them which Bedekar depicts more or less explicitly in his novel. For minimal understanding, it would suffice to understand that the Jews belonged to 'non-Christian' religion and 'non-German' nationality. This dual feeling seemed to have created a sentiment that Judaism is a threat to Christian religion and that it does not constitute a moral code of German culture. The fusion of Christianity and nationalism resulted in the concept that Christianity is indispensable to 'Germanism'. According to Goldhagen, this fusion of Christianity and Germanism allied with the concept of 'race' and thus was born Jewish race as opposed to Germans. Consequently, by opposition to Germans, Jews were defined as 'anti-Germans'. This fabricated dichotomy is largely responsible for racial prejudice from which springs an aspect of external conflict and social injustices that were inflicted on the Jews. Vishram Bedekar makes a representation of this idea as expressed by one of his Jewish characters in the novel, "I call myself a German. Germany is my fatherland. Deutsch is my mother tongue. But Germany does not recognise me as her son. I am a Jew."⁴ Bedekar shows various forms of social injustices in his novel. To cite examples, he depicts the conditions where public places were closed to Jews and they were forbidden to use them. History shows that they were very strategically driven out of political, social, economic and cultural life of Germany. A citation from the novel would illustrate the argument. "(...) Later this became part of their experience. People stared at them, pointed rude fingers wherever they went. Jews were summarily dismissed from their jobs. How could they survive? Where could they live? No one would rent apartments to them. Where could they eat? Restaurants and cafes refused them service. Entertainment theatres displayed "Closed to Jew" notices."⁵ With Hitler's rise to power began the episodes of mass killing of Jews. Hitler planned 'the final solution' for 'the Jewish problem' which he demonstrated in Holocaust. The reply of 'why' such hatred would not be difficult to trace as point out learned critics Eric Dunning and Mennel Stephen. They write,

*The question why, in 1939, the path was taken to the murdering of all Jews is (...) not difficult to answer. The decision itself and its implementation followed directly from a central doctrine of the Nazi belief-system. Hitler and his followers had never made a secret of their total and irrevocable enmity towards the Jews or of their wish to destroy them. It is not surprising that, when the risk no longer seems too great, they finally began to translate their destruction wish into fact.*⁶

If we see the violence in the order – racial hatred, politics of isolation, politics of extermination and finally holocaust – we can understand its growing intensity. The story of *Ranaangan* revolves around the politics of extermination – as the novel appeared in 1939 and the Holocaust had yet not taken place. It seems that Bedekar chose the episodes of extermination to demonstrate the intensity of the violence and conflict in the outer (outer to Germany) world as well. The story of the novel takes place in ship called *Vesuvius* which is voyaging from Genoa to Shanghai. Bedekar uses a thematic device of voyage to explore the conditions of German Jews in the rest of the world which allows him to emphasis on the conflict that is happening in the external world. This violence, following Hitler's ambition, crossed the geographical borders of Germany and over the time took the form of the Second World War. Not only Germany but indeed the whole globe contributes to this bloody atrocity whose center becomes Europe. One of the sources of this contribution lies in the political grudges between countries. Most of the countries were then under European colonization because of which, and more or less for their own interest, they had to participate in this global conflict. On the one hand we had Hitler who was determined to 'reform' the globe from a racial point of view as the quote below will clarify, on the other the allied countries were responsible for demolishing his inhuman ambitions. "It was in this book [Mein Kampf] that Hitler made the ominous revelation of his future intentions of racially reshaping Germany and, eventually the whole globe."⁷, writes historian Milan Hauner.

The racial conflict had therefore become the global conflict. Hitler eventually tries to realize his intentions with the instrument of "the final solution". He not only carries out the extermination and slaughter of the Jews inside Germany but also torments them everywhere in the regions under German occupation and under the

control of the Axis-powers. The use of the 'voyage' and voyageurs-characters from different part of the world allow Bedekar to portray the socio-political violent situations in the different corners of the world. Violence is evoked as soon as the novel begins. The gloomy ambiance of death and destruction already adds to the meaning of the title *Ranaangan*. The destruction due to the First World War allows the readers to situate themselves in the narrative content of the novel. The author goes on to describe in short the social conditions in Italy, England and France. Readers find references to Hitler, Mussolini, Italian conquest of Ethiopia and to its recognition by Hitler on the basis of racial 'inferiority' of Ethiopians. Bedekar depicts all these conditions in short excerpts. Here is cited an example, "A sylvian landscape but disfiguring billboards everywhere, with messages bearing Mussolini's signature. When people met they raised their hands in the fascist salute. (...) In England, in France and amongst other Allies the profiteers had done the same as the Jews had in Germany."⁸ We thus find conflict and violence not only inside Germany but all over the planet. Everywhere there is only *Ranaangan* and hatred as the dialogue from the novel tells us, "Today the English hate the Irish, the Germans hate the Jews."⁹ Bedekar depicts the episode of Port Said, the door to the East, where Jews are forbidden to land. This episode highlights the misfortune of German Jews caused by the duality of their identity. There is no refuge for them in the countries associated to Germany because they were Jews and there is no refuge equally in the allied countries because they are Germans. For example, English officials who used to train Egyptian army, watched the individuals so that no German could enter Egypt. Bedekar takes into account this violent treatment received by German Jews during layover halt at the Port Said. The following citation illustrates this treatment.

*He turned to her. "British passport, Madam?" (...) "I am sorry, you are not permitted to land on these shores" (...) "German Jews are not allowed on these shores"*¹⁰

The author equally evoked the violent communal conflict between the Arabs and the Jews for Palestine. Bedekar thus gives to his novel different shades of conflicts and violence. Jews are not allowed to land on any piece of land. This leaves them in the closed space of the ship *Vesuvius* wandering for refuge on land. However, they do not get any and this makes Hertha take refuge in water, in the ocean. She commits suicide torn by psychological torcher, her inner conflict, and thus find her 'country'.

Inner Conflict: Imprisonment and Liberation

This part of the article intends to encompass the mental anguish caused to the Jews by the situation that they were facing. For example, Hertha is torn between the choice of the need of money to save her son and her own virtue. The wish and inability imposed by anti-Semitism to accomplish that wish are often brought in confrontation in the novel. The anti-Semitism in Germany not only tortured the Jews physically but also economically. "You are not allowed to take anything out of Germany. Remember that! No money, no jewellery, no gold!"¹¹ This added to their mental anguish and sufferings. The Jewish Germans of *Ranaangan* therefore face economic crises during their extermination. Chakradhar on his journey to India encounters German Jew whose property is confiscated by the German government under the pretext of the demands of the War. Among these characters, the condition of Louis' mother seems to be the most pathetic. The illness of her child puts her in mental anguish and forces her to trade her body with Bharwani. She needs the money to get him vaccinated against cholera and smallpox in order to disembark in Shanghai. The fear of her child's illness tears her between two contradictory demands, her virtue and her child's life.

*When Louis became ill, his mother got the fright of her life. She had a sick child! Not a penny in her pocket! No one to lean on. What if Louis got sick in Shanghai? When a simple inoculation cost a pound, how would she pay for his treatment? Could she do what Martha had done? She was faced with two impossible choices. Her virtue? Or her son's life.*¹²

However, the author does not tell us what happens to the child. Only one reason can be seen for this silence. This reason lies in the fact that the author has no answers for the social questions he raises in his novel. He remains silent and leaves it to the readers to draw the conclusions or find the solutions. He introduces us

to another character, Keitel, who is trying to learn English to make a living in Shanghai. The language barrier causes him problems in the face of which he finds himself in the trap of mental agony. Forced by hope, he tries to find his shelter by studying the map of the world.

You are so right! But did you notice that my pencil does not move towards Europe? I study this map every day. Many of us play this game. I look at each new country, every new port, new city. I read their names and wonder. Could we go there? Earn a living? Make a home there?¹³

This hope gives him a reason to laugh from the bottom of his heart. In him we discover a character who knows no happiness after the anti-Jewish policy had begun to take on its color. However, his laughter lasts only a few days as his hope of learning English fades after his mentor, Chakradhar, disembarks in India. This stop to India is the last before the ship's destination to Shanghai. Consequently, it hastens the total loss of almost all Jews and renders India a catalyst of their doom. The manifestation of the loss of hope of finding shelter is also demonstrated in the anguish of Martha's mother. This endless quest leaves them with only one desire, which Martha's mother manifests in the following cited dialogue. "You asked me where I want to live? I am now tired of everything. I have only one desire left. To die and to be buried in Palestine, the Holy Land."¹⁴ The search for shelter, happiness and love implicitly becomes the search for death. However, the author does not focus on the life and crises of the secondary characters. On the other hand, he centers all the complexity of these crises in the character of Hertha whose implicit quest for death is accomplished after the separation from Chakradhar. We see that all the Jews on the boat face misfortune. Bedekar uses internal focalization through the character of Chakradhar to portray these characters. Chakradhar has a kind of prejudice against the Germans. Nevertheless, he only understands their crises after meeting Hertha. Hertha's metaphorical imprisonment on the ship extends her a chance to enjoy few moments of happiness by the virtue of love, although short lived, between her and Chakradhar. However, her separation from Chakradhar due to India's policy of not allowing the Jews to land in India plays a role of catalyst in her death. It seems that the death becomes Hertha's liberator from all the misfortune that she faces.

I propose now to very briefly examine the situation in India during that period as far as India's policy towards the Jews is concerned. This is to see how the novelist portrays the socio-historical situation in India. For this, it would be relevant to understand Hitler's words and his take *vis-a-vis* the British colonial rule in India.

Shoot Gandhi, and if this doesn't suffice to reduce them to submission, shoot a dozen leading members of Congress; and if that doesn't suffice, shoot 200 and so on until order is established. You will see how quickly they will collapse as soon as you make it clear that you mean business.¹⁵

This is what Hitler advised Lord Irwin who was the British Foreign Secretary at the time. These words of Hitler show that he was pro-Raj. In fact, Hitler's strategy seems very ambiguous in relation to India and the British occupation of India. Although England was hostile to Hitler's policies, he tried to justify and advocate British colonization in order to gain the England's favor. He also criticizes the British administration for tolerating disorder and civil disobedience in India. He gives the advice (the above citation) so that the British administration can manage to restore social order in India. According to him, this administration was wasting time by negotiating with the 'Asian jugglers' who were objects of aversion. This complex position is difficult to understand. On the one hand in Europe he was preparing to go to war against England, on the other in India he was against the anti-colonial movements. The root cause of Hitler's ambiguous attitude towards England can be seen in his desire to make England an ally of Germany. Furthermore, his racial ideology seems to have prompted him to support England for its colonial rule in India. The following citation exemplifies his racial strategy with England in relation to India.

As a man of Germanic blood, would in spite of everything, rather see India under English rule than any other.¹⁶

On the other hand, the geographical location of India would facilitate the creation of a transcontinental route free of Anglo-Saxon control if ever Germany managed to dominate all of Europe. That is why he has Nazi propaganda spread in India, although it does not gain strength. Secondly, central to this propaganda was Hitler's fear that India would be the largest reservoir of manpower that England could use against Germany. As far as the situation inside India is concerned, it was explicitly neither anti-German nor anti-English. The population was divided following the separation of Gandhi and Subashchandra Bose. Bose advocated 'direct action' against the Raj in India and aspired support and help from the Axis-Powers. This strategy of Bose is difficult to understand as it would explicitly lead to the acceptance of Hitler's racial strategy. Bose, although knowing that Hitler saw the Indians as the population of a non-Aryan race, wanted Nazi Germany to help India against England which, according to Hitler, is a Nordic race. Although Bose was hostile to racist Nazi policies, his yearning for fascist aid overshadowed this hostility. The reason for help from Nazi policies may lie in the ardor nationalism but at the same time it cannot be ignored that Bose refused to give refuge to the Jews in India.

It is interesting to note that Bose, in spite of his outspoken criticism of Nazi racist practices against the Asians, refused to support the Congress motion in favour of Jews seeking asylum in India.¹⁷

In addition, the Nazi propaganda in India was already there during the period of provincial election of 1937. Ultrationalists who saw little efficacy in passive resistance against Raj were easily accessible for Nazi propaganda with which they were impressed. The acceptance of racial strategy by the ultra-nationalist party added to the refusal of asylum for the Jews.

Germany's solemn idea of the revival of the Aryan culture, the glorification of the Swastika, her patronage of Vedic learning and the ardent championship of the tradition of Indo-Germanic civilization are welcomed by the religious and sensible Hindus of India with a jubilant hope. (...) I think that the Germany's crusade against the enemies of Aryan culture will bring all the Aryan nations of the world to their senses and awaken the Indian Hindus for the restoration of their lost glory.¹⁸

Bedekar tries to incorporate in his novel one such Indian ultranationalist character who threatens all those who might want to change the name of 'Hindustan', the place of Hindus. Driven by the fear of dual identity of the Jews and Nazi propaganda in India, the British administration closes the doors of India for the Jews what the author shows us in *Ranaangan*. "Britain is at war with Germany. We were German citizens. We carried German passports. We were the enemy! India was closed to us."¹⁹

So we see everyone in conflict more or less explicitly against the Jews. In this time of war, the Jews serve as the epitome of misfortune. The conflict is not limited to Germany, to Europe, but it spreads its fire all over the planet like the plague. This plague attacks the Jews and more atrociously, the German Jews. It leaves them no shelter on the earth. They are "doomed" not to land anywhere on land as the official in Port said in the novel says. It is forbidden for all Jews, including Hertha, to enter any country because of the dual identity. Surrounded by water they remain in a closed space of *Vesuvius*. Towards the end we discover that Hertha finally finds refuge in the water. Torn by her own crises caused more or less by the conflict in the outside world that we have already seen she drowns and finds her own liberation in the form of death. India begins to experiment successfully as the catalyst for the death of Hertha as soon as *Vesuvius* sets sail after its layover halt in Bombay. Not only does India hastens Hertha's death, but it also re-evokes the despair of other characters. The disembarkment of all the Indian characters who are friendly towards the Jews begins misfortune of the latter ones again. After the departure of *Vesuvius* from India there is no real story to tell. We can only learn what happened to Hertha through her letters to Chakradhar. These letters manifest the aggravation of her anguish in direct relation to the distance from India. Let's try to take them into account.

She only writes three letters to Chakradhar during her trip from Bombay to Manila. In the first, during the trip from Bombay to Colombo she speaks of the loss of enthusiasm of the other Jewish characters and evokes the cause of the refusal of refuge in India. She also talks about the beginning of the Great War in Europe. Be this letter read with caution, it can be found that it speaks of the generalities which revolve around the other Jewish characters, the War and Nazism. However, in this letter she seems to have compared the death she would have had in Germany and her anguish after her separation from Chakradhar. The comparison between death and anguish already manifests her will to perish instead of suffering separation. This separation in India therefore hastens her death. India that separates her from Chakradhar and that accelerates her death. When she learns of the arrival in India she expresses her will to die in the following manner.

She squeezed her mother's lap about herself, in a desperate attempt to get back into the safety of her mother's womb. [...] She looked beseechingly at her mother as if she was saying, "Mutti, you gave birth to me without knowing if I want to be born. Now take me back, keep me safe. I can no longer bear this cruel world."²⁰

However, her real mother can do nothing about it, and she had to find her refuge in the 'mother' water which frees her from her misfortunes, her crises and the world in conflict. So we notice that the death of Hertha is triggered by Germany and accelerated by India. Hertha makes this journey from her extermination until her death. These two ends of the journey revolve around the axis of violence and conflict caused due to anti-Semitism.

CONCLUSION

In this article, an attempt is made to take into account the problems faced by the Jews due to anti-Semitic ideology. We discussed the world-in-conflict during the Second World War. For arriving to 'particular' from 'general', we have done a kind of case study of the fictional character of Hertha. To sum up, we have studied the social conditions which impose obstacles in the way of reconciliation and convergence of the destiny of two character who belong to the countries of opposing ideologies which we wanted to demonstrate in this article with the help of the novel *Ranaangan*. This makes us think and study further that whether only adverse socio-political conditions are responsible for the development of any relation, be it relation between human beings or relation between nations, et cetera. We have seen that Hertha is not only victim of adverse social conditions but also her own inner violent conflict. These crises force the two characters sometimes to come closer and sometimes to get separated from each other. Hungarian philosopher, George Lukacs tries to locate the source of instability and uncertainty of human behaviour. It seems that he finds answer in Hegelian philosophy and tells us that the Hegelian philosophy sees human being as a product of his/her self, his/her activity in history.²¹ We need to ask ourselves whether a helpless individual is capable of doing anything in such adverse conditions as was anti-Semitism for Jews. This makes us think about the contribution of Hertha towards her own life and whether she could do anything to improve it. The then socio-political conditions do not allow us to reply affirmatively and thus brings in question the absurd helplessness of human beings. Hertha is victim not only of adverse socio-historical conditions which could not be overcome but also she is victim of the absurd helplessness. This feeling of being unable to help oneself is equally violent than that of the conditions in the outside world. The violence, both inner and external, makes the novel extremely tragic. Hertha finds the only solution in Death and Chakradhar is condemned to live his life filled with remorse with his incapacity to act. The battlefield which indicates the title *Ranaangan* is actually more violent as it is one's fight and conflict with and for oneself.

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Footnotes

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