CHAPTER ONE

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
1. RAMANALAL VASANTLAL DESAI: THE MAN AND THE WRITER

Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai (12 May 1892 – 20 September 1954) was born in Shinor, Gujarat, a village on the bank of the river Narmada. In 1916, Desai graduated with an MA in English and Gujarati literature. After completing education, he took up the job of a head clerk in the then Baroda State, where he later held various positions of responsibility before retiring in 1948.

Desai emerged on the literary scene when Kanaiyalal Munshi, one of the most renowned Gujarati novelists, was at the peak of his career. This is important to note because it was a challenge for any novelist to find an audience in the era when Munshi dominated the literary sphere. Desai, however, has made a distinct mark in Gujarati literature by writing novels that depict Gujarati middle class life and characters. On the other hand, Munshi, who ruled over the hearts of Gujarati readers then, has written historical fictions that have characters of superhuman ability. Being a prolific novelist, Desai immediately fashioned out his position on the literary scene, although his career was parallel to that of Munshi from 1925 to 1950. (Thaker, 80) *Samyukta*, a play, was Desai’s first literary writing; his first novel, *Thug* (1924-25), was serialised in *Navagujarat*, a magazine. (Joshi, 480)

Desai, who has carved a name in the literary canon as a novelist, has also written short stories, plays, poems, character-sketches, travelogues, historical essays, literary criticism and autobiography. One notable and strikingly different work of his is a five-volume essay, namely *Apsara* (Vol. 1-5), on the life of prostitutes. Thus, he is an accomplished literary writer who has attempted almost all literary genres; yet, his contribution is valued most as a write of novels whose themes and characters mirror Gujarati society of Desai’s lifetime. (Thaker, 83) Even *Bharelo Agni*, the novel whose setting is nineteenth-century Gujarat, has characters with whom Gujarati youth of 1930s could easily identify. Desai has achieved this familiarity by using everyday language spoken among educated Gujarati people around him. All his characters speak in the same idiom—a strategy that enhances readability of novels; and, as a result, their popularity.

Throughout his career as an administrator, he worked with the Baroda state. This service, however, never presented a hindrance in his career as a writer. In his autobiography *MadhyahnanaMrugajal* (1956), Desai notes, “Even when I was an employee of a native state, no superior officer had stopped me from either criticising or ridiculing the British or native administration.” (Mehta, 12)

History was Desai’s pet subject, and he has strived to understand and delineate Indian history, culture, religion and society through his writings. (Mehta, 18) Out of twenty-eight novels that Desai has written, following eight novels have historical or mythical themes: *Bharelo Agni, Kshitij, Thug, PahadanaPushpo, Kalbhoj, Shauryatarpan, Balajogan and ShachiPaulomi*. The writer carried out a deep study of a particular historical era before writing about it or using it as a background for a novel. He even visited certain areas so that he could write an authentic description of the place. (Mehta, 31)
Since this study is about R. V. Desai’s classic novel _Bharelo Agni_, and because Desai was best recognised as a novelist, the titles of all his published novels are mentioned below:


Most critics inevitably compare the themes handled by Desai and Munshi, two contemporaries. It is intriguing to note that although Munshi lived an active political life, his novels do not focus on the day’s social or political issues. As a public figure, Munshi knew enough about social problems to see innumerable stories in them. In spite of this, he chose to write historical novels, focusing on events that took place centuries ago. On the other hand, Desai, whose career as a writer, for a large part, was parallel to Munshi’s, did not participate in public life. He did not take a lead in any social movement, nor did he participate in social work with an admitted intent of bringing social improvement. Nevertheless, as a novelist, he consistently wrote about social issues of his era. Although Desai had the opportunity of closely observing Gandhi’s various campaigns, political or reformist, he did not actively engage in any of them. (Thaker, 81) Yet, he voiced Gandhi’s message in his writings—a point of departure from his rival and contemporary Munshi. One reason why Desai stayed away from political and social activities could be his employment with the Baroda state. Besides, he was too shy a person to be involved in public life as an activist of politician. Once, when Desai was travelling by a train, Gandhi and Vallabhbhai Patel were also in the same compartment. Yet, due to shyness, Desai could not approach them for a conversation. (Mehta, 55) Such nature must have limited his involvement to his profession and literary writing.

After G. M. Tripathi, Desai was the first Gujarati novelist to structure his novels around social and historical events that shaped the contemporary milieu. (Thaker, 83) As an administrator, Desai’s routine job was to implement welfare schemes for people. Therefore, he could learn enough about social problems by interacting with the masses. He has successfully employed these experiences in his writing. In the Gujarati literary canon, Ramanalal Desai and Pannalal Patel are the only two novelists who do not seek inspiration in western writers. Ramanalal found themes for stories in his environment, not in another writer. (Mehta, 57)

An oft-discussed issue among critics is Desai’s immense popularity. Many critics have explained that Desai’s use of the love story is behind his wide appeal among readers. Whatever the theme of the novel, Desai brings in the subplot of a sweet love story in his novels, a ploy that appeals young readers. Even in _Bharelo Agni_, a historical novel with the setting of nineteenth-century uprising, the romantic relation between Kalyani and Gautam plays a prominent role in taking the plot forward. (Joshi, 482) Besides, most of his characters show morally superior virtue of sacrifice for the loved one. For example, in _Bharelo Agni_, Kalyani encourages Gautam to fulfil his dream of fighting a battle against the Company
Sarkar, sacrificing her personal joy of marital bliss. Desai’s love stories often become intriguing because of the element of a love triangle, giving abundant scope to perform a ‘virtuous me’, as one character usually sacrifices his or her love and pleasure for another. Consequently, the character who cannot fulfil his or her desire to be with the loved one becomes noble in making a sacrifice of personal happiness. Although love triangles often become sentimental, such situations do appeal to young readers. Sometimes, Desai joyfully describes sugary moments of conjugal love in his novels.

Apart from the theme of a love story, Desai uses a few other popular ploys to reach a wider audience. For example, one of the characters in his novels is often a mysterious man whose past life is not known to many. Such a character can be a saint or an elderly figure or a strange person whose actions appear puzzling. In Bharelo Agni, too, Rudradatta, one of the chief protagonists, brings an unfathomable aura around him. From other characters’ comments, we learn that the sage-like patriarch, who lives the quiet life of a scholar and a guru, was once a revolutionary; that he once wielded weapons and rode horses; that many political figures of national importance personally knew him and sought his assistance; that he had also led armies and visited many countries to instigate a coup against the Company’s rule in India. Rudradatta’s such varied traits, real or imagined, keep the readers glued to the novel as they wait in suspense how Rudradatta will bring a pivotal change in the sequence of events.

One can easily note a number of thrilling coincidences in Desai’s novels. Characters meeting each other at unexpected places, a disguised character turning out to be a familiar figure, historical figures mingling in the novel’s imaginary world—all this too helps Desai in creating works that can fascinate his readership. In Bharelo Agni, Gautam meets Saiyad and Mahavir at most unexpected places; similarly, Kalyani and Tryambak travel to be with Gautam at warfront in disguise; and, historical figures like Tatya Tope and Rani Lakshmibai interact with Rudradatta. This strategy may make the events unconvincing, but it has definitely helped in making the work absorbing.

Desai serialised all his novels in periodicals. Bharelo Agni was serialised in Kaumudi (1935). Because the work was serialised, we often find Desai repeating his ideas—a fault that the readers of a periodical would rarely notice. In fact, it would help them make connections with the previous episodes. For example, Rudradatta’s argument that the people leading the uprising are those who want to re-establish the seat of Mughal emperor or that of the peshwas is repeated a number of times either in dialogues or in the novel’s narration. Gautam’s wedding dreams are also repeated in the novel.

Sometimes, Desai also makes trivial mistakes in presenting facts. When Rudradatta begins his travel with Kalyani and Tryambak, the distance that they travel on the first night is once said to be six kilometres, and later, the writer mentions the distance as nine kilometres. Such minutiae, however, are insignificant and should be ignored while evaluating the work. These details have found a mention in this study to emphasise the point that some errors or repetitions occur in Desai’s novels because his works were serialised in periodicals.

Most of Desai’s novels lack proper editing, and hence some of them depict unconvincing plot development. The novels have this flaw because most of his novels were immediately made
available in the book-form after their publication in magazines, and neither the writer nor the publishers bothered to restructure them. (Joshi, 490)

Desai’s most significant achievement is in choosing common Gujarati people as his characters and telling their stories. His predecessor Govardhanram Tripathi’s characters achieve almost divine status; Munshi’s characters are superhuman in their ability; whereas, Desai’s protagonists remain typical in their Gujarati middleclass attitudes and lifestyle. All his characters are ordinary human beings. By not depending on elite or historical characters for storytelling, Desai democratised the form of novel in Gujarati literature. (Mehta, 60-61)

If he is remarkably appealing to readers, Desai is also a conventional writer—in the sense that he did not do anything drastically new with the form of novel. His plot construction, characters, dialogues and style—all remain simple and common in all his works. For example, his novels are written in the omnipresent point of view; not once does he change this. Even his wide popularity did not inspire him to take liberty and experiment. Because of these reasons, Desai has firmly secured his place in the canon as one of the finest ‘storytellers’, an adept craftsman of a specific type of narration. (Mehta, 58)

It seems the novelist knew well about his appeal to the masses; and, he also knew that because of that he could be passed off as ‘just another popular writer’ by the academia. Desai writes in his essay UrmianeVichar, “I am not great—neither as a writer, nor as a person! I don’t regret it either. I wish I live a similar life in every birth…I often feel that I will not be able to write better than how I am writing now.” (Doshi, 217)

One example is sufficient to get an idea of this storyteller’s mass appeal. In the middle of his novels, Desai frequently comments on social circumstances or on human nature, like a visionary presenting the truth. Such was Desai’s popularity that even his commentaries were published in a separate volume of quotable quotes (Suvarnaraj). (Joshi, 488) At the peak of his career, in the middle of the twentieth century, Desai’s works had achieved such popularity among the educated class that having read his novels was considered a ‘certificate of being cultured’. (Joshi, 481)

2. The Plot of Bharelo Agni:

Bharelo Agni (A Seething Era), first published in 1935, is a fast-paced historical novel that unfolds in the backdrop of 1857 uprising against the Company Sarkar. The purpose of writing this novel seems to expound the idea of nonviolence through the character of Rudradatta. How people and leaders of nineteenth century fail to understand the power of nonviolence is the key issue of the novel, in which Rudradatta emerges as a visionary guru far ahead of his times. As is the case with almost all of Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai’s novels, a love story, that of Gautam and Kalyani, plays an important role in the plot. It is a heart-rending, tragic love story that ends with Gautam’s death. In addition, through this novel, Desai presents a study of the Company Sarkar’s raj in India; and, he also discusses the intentions of those who had led the uprising against the Company—these two aspects make the work a classic
historical fiction of Gujarati literature. *Bharelo Agni* has secured its place in the canon because of these historical themes that provide flesh to the skeleton of a love story.

Rudradatta, the guru of an ashram in an imaginary village in Gujarat, his daughter Kalyani, his rebellious student Gautam and his obedient ward Tryambak are the main characters of the work. The other characters include Johnson, the priest; Lucy, the priest’s daughter; Shankar, a ferryman of the village; Mahavir, a member of the landed gentry, who has turned a leader of the uprising; and, Saiyad, a soldier and a member of the revolutionary group. Desai has invoked a few historical figures that interact with the fictitious characters, making the work exciting and to some extent melodramatic. These historical characters include Mangal Pandey, Tatya Tope and Rani Lakshmibai. Apart from the priest mentioned above, two more white characters appear in the novel, namely Peter and Jackson. They are army officers. The army officers represent two extremes of sympathy and hatred with which the colonisers treated their subjects. Henry, a white clergyman, makes one appearance to expose ‘cultural complications’ that can arise due to the proximity of two vastly different races. These are the recognisable characters of *Bharelo Agni*.

The plot development takes place in four broad steps that the writer has presented as four parts of the novel: one, the reasons that led to the uprising; two, the beginning of the doomed revolution; Rudradatta’s death, suggesting the failure of people to understand the path of nonviolence; and, finally, Gautam’s tragic death, symbolic of the end and failure of revolution.

At the outset in the novel, in the first part titled ‘The Triggers of an Uprising’, Desai introduces Rudradatta, the grand old man, a mysterious figure, who is renowned all over Hindustan for his honesty, generosity and scholarship. Since the writer’s primary aim in writing this novel is to profess ideas of nonviolence, and since Rudradatta is the one to preach the ideas, it is essential to introduce Rudradatta right at the beginning. Desai immediately brings in Gautam as well, the character that stands for the brave, combative and aggressive youth that is against the Company. By showing Gautam as a student of Rudradatta, the guru who exhorts universal love and nonviolence, Desai has created opportunities for presenting a conflict of ideologies. The occasion arises soon, when Rudradatta turns in Gautam to Peters, the officer who had come looking for Gautam to the ashram, saying,

‘I am leaving now. Gautam, my son, I bless you. Don’t go astray from the path of truth, and don’t ever take refuge in violence again. God will save you!’ (Desai, 21)

By the first two chapters, readers also learn about the love relation between Gautam and Kalyani and about the possibility of a love-triangle because of Tryambak’s presence. In the first part, we read a chapter that gives title to the novel *Bharelo Agni*. The chapter describes Indian soldiers’ overall discontentment that forces them to unite against the Company. Desai masterfully crafts this by narrating how white officers humiliate the brave and loyal Indian soldiers like Gautam and Mangal Pandey; and, how white officers like Jackson abuse Indian
soldiers and their faith. Desai depicts an incident in which Jackson, a white officer, attempts to touch bhang, a drink sacred for the Hindus:

When Jackson called him a ‘coolie’ and a ‘swine’, Mangal, in spite of simmering anger, kept himself in check. But, when the sozzled Englishman touched bhang, Mangal became uncontrollably furious. He could have tolerated Jackson touching his meals, but Jackson touched bhang, Bhagawan Shankar’s gift to His followers. All the Hindi soldiers first offered a little bhang to Shankarji, like true devotees, and then they themselves took the drink. The drunken British officer had insulted Bhagwan Mahadev. Mangal jumped up, and, in a fit of rage, hit Jackson on the face with brutal power. The British officer stumbled and fell down in a heap. (Desai, 37)

The second part of the novel, titled ‘An Untimely Blaze’, the longest one, completes the introduction of all the characters except that of Rani Lakshmibai. The novel’s this meaty section thickens the plot by delving deeper on ideas that were introduced in the first part. Desai gives various indications in this part that Kalyani and Gautam’s relation would be a tragic liaison. Since a number of romantic encounters between both the characters are described in this part, readers feel fascinated by the lovers; and, when they receive signals that it is a doomed relation, readers, aroused by pity and fear, feel more involved in Gautam and Kalyani’s fate. This device has played a crucial role in making the novel a widely read classic.

The Company’s misdeeds, other than the ill-treatment of Indians, are narrated mostly in discussions and descriptions. Interestingly, Desai makes suggestions of cultural conflicts that arise because of the proximity of the coloniser and the colonised by showing that Lucy, priest Johnson’s daughter, is in love with Tryambak, ashram’s Brahmin student. Most important of all, Rudradatta’s ideas of nonviolence become clearer in his firm refusal to lead the revolution. Desai also delineates, through Rudradatta, the selfish reasons for which the leaders of the uprising have taken up arms against the Company; and, he highlights the reasons due to which the uprising will fail. To sum up, the second part of the novel establishes Rudradatta as a prophet of nonviolence as well as a harbinger of a change in political system. He clearly states that instead of returning to badshahs and peshwas, India should become a democracy.

Desai’s famed skills of depicting honeyed romance receive full scope in the section. Following is the description of one such rendezvous:

Kalyani observed Gautam. His restless eyes shone in darkness. She knew why his eyes seemed excited, and the reasons delighted her. Although Gautam had lost weight and he looked lean, he had matured into a man. His posture possessed a masculine strength. She wished to rest her head on that chest, to be in those arms. Gautam’s presence thrilled Kalyani.
A chill ran down Kalyani’s spine. Do my eyes also betray excitement? (Desai, 78)

When Tatya Tope gifts a bracelet to Kalyani, so that she can wear it at her wedding, Tope and Rudradatta both turn despondent at the mention of the occasion. From their response to the idea of Kalyani’s wedding, the tragic destiny of the relation becomes obvious. The fate of their relation becomes more pronounced in Kalyani’s failure to tie seven knots on a thread for an owl’s seven hoots. The owl, as if sending fate’s message, gives seventh hoot when Kalyani loses the thread in dark. She fails to tie the last knot on time to secure Gautam against perils.

Rudradatta’s ideas about nonviolence and about the fickle revolutionaries are clearly expressed in his discussion with Tatya Tope. Explaining why he does not support the revolt, Rudradatta tells Tatya Tope,

‘...I certainly feel that if these numerous, small, insignificant states of Hindustan disappear, it would not be a great loss to us. The excesses of these states have sunk our ship in past, and future too seems bleak if they gain power once again. Let the wheel of time crush them for good.’ (Desai, 105)

Desai also summarises historical events and happenings to make them a part of this novel. He presents such narrations to explain historical circumstances,

Once in a while, Bajirao woke up from sensual self-indulgence and agonised over his abject state; since his friends taunted him, he often mulled over the idea of fighting for independence from the Company; but Bajirao feared death, and hence, he could not be free of other fears. When he made efforts to liberate his state, people perceived it as a treacherous intrigue against the Company. At last, when Bapubhosale, a fearless soldier, passed away, the peshwa rule, too, went in flames. Accepting an annuity of eight lakh rupees, the last peshwa went in exile. He left Pune and put up in Brahmavart-Bithur, on the bank of the Ganga, leading a quiet and secluded life. (Desai, 103)

In a meeting of revolutionaries, which he attends uninvited, Rudradatta articulates his ideas about the nonviolent war,

‘If you wage a war, don’t ignore your moral duty,’ [says Rudradatta]

‘Yes, but what if war is our duty?’

‘Then go on war, but eliminate violence from that war.’

‘Have you heard of a war that does not commit violence?’

‘If no one has heard of such wars, people will learn about it for the first time.’
‘How do we go about this war?’

‘If individual selfishness and the desire for revenge disappear, the war will not require weapons.’ (Desai, 158)

At the end of ‘An Untimely Blaze’, second part of the novel, Gautam leaves Vihar and Kalyani for his calling to be on the battlefield; and, Rudradatta refuses every entreaty to join the revolutionaries. Readers are left eagerly waiting to know what will be the future of Kalyani and Gautam’s relationship and the uprising that has prematurely swept over a large part of India.

Part three and four are smaller sections, in which Desai winds up the novel. Both the sections present tragic incidents at a fast pace, including descriptions of heroic battles. ‘The Lion’s Fall’, the third part of the novel, begins with Mangal Pandey’s death. The chapter describes Mangal Pandey’s execution in detail, presenting him as a brave soldier. In the novel, Mangal Pandey is shown as Rudradatta’s former student. Hence, to emphasise Rudradatta’s ideas of nonviolence, Desai shows Mangal regretting the violent path chosen by him,

Mangal looked at the gallows once again, and, with a calm face, he did a namaskar to Guru Rudradatta’s face. He realised that the death sentence could not prevent crimes from taking place; and, similarly, murders could not change anyone’s heart. The shackles of foreign rule would be broken not by a weapons, but by courage; not by daggers, but by intelligence; not by swords, but by long-term consistent efforts. Mangal wished to be born again, and he wished to meet his death for the sake of Hindustan’s liberation. He now thought that probably the soldiers whom he had killed might have asked the same cycle of birth and death to keep Hindustan enslaved by the Company! (Desai, 211)

In this part of the novel, we see Rani Lakshmibai coming over to see Rudradatta. Lakshmibai insists that Rudradatta should join the revolutionaries. Rudradatta agrees to be with the revolutionaries and guide them if they agree to opt for a nonviolent battle. Eventually, Rudradatta sets out on a long journey with Kalyani and Tryambak, only to meet his death, which was, in fact, an assassination ordered my Mahavir, Rudradatta’s long-time friend. Thus, Desai provides evidence of the shortsighted view of the uprising’s leaders: If Rudradatta cannot provide them ammunition, he is of no use to any of the revolutionaries.

In the plot of the novel, Rudradatta’s death disappoints the readers because of the built up of mystery and expectations around the character. Right since the beginning of the novel, the guru appears as someone capable of carrying out a phenomenal act. Unfortunately, it does not turn out to be so. In the end, he remains just a prophet whose message no one understands. He keeps mouthing lofty ideas that his contemporaries cannot appreciate. Desai portrays Rudradatta as a visionary far ahead of his time.

Once Rudradatta dies, Desai has to connect loose ends to complete the story: he has to show what happens to Kalyani and Gautam’s relation; and, how the revolt ends. All the other
characters have already played their roles. The writer can either ignore them or mention them in a passing reference.

In ‘Beyond the Earthly Life’, the last part of the novel, Gautam, the novel’s heroic character, is shown engaged in fierce battles against the Company. Under his leadership, the revolutionary faction wins two battles. After suffering an agonizing dilemma between moral duty and love, Gautam has opted the course of fulfilling his duty to be at the warfront. Although he contributes his mite in the cause of the uprising, like his friend Mangal Pandey, he realises at deathbed that the path of violence is futile. Thus, even Gautam’s death is a device to corroborate the grand idea of nonviolence that the guru has preached throughout the novel. On his deathbed, Gautam talks to Kalyani,

‘Kalyani!’ Gautam said.

‘What?’

‘Guruji was right.’

‘About what?’

‘Revenge and violence begin a chain of defeats...’

‘Did you want to win anything?’

‘Love...With love we can win everyone and everything...Everyone wins and everyone lives...’

‘So, what will you do with your weapons?’

‘Weapons... I quit them... The moment I was stabbed, I gave them up...’

(Desai, 324)

The sweet love story meets a tragic end in Gautam’s death. On Tryambak’s advice, Kalyani chooses to live to realise her grandfather’s vision.

The novel too ends here, leaving the reader to ask a question: Why didn’t Desai write few more chapters to give a summary of how the uprising ended, and how it influenced the Indian life in general? The fact that Desai ends the novel when Gautam meets his end makes one conclude that Desai’s intention in writing the novel was to create a character that, like a visionary, professed ideas of love and nonviolence. For achieving this, he selected the apt settings of the uprising. Since Rudradatta is dead in the novel, Desai does not bother to expand the novel further to discuss the uprising and its aftereffects. If he had, Bharelo Agni would have been a complete historical fiction about the uprising. The end also signifies how important the love story was for Desai’s intentions. Even after Rudradatta’s death, he does bother to write one more part of the novel for the sake of giving a proper end to the tragic romance. He could have similarly written about the uprising, but he chooses not to, confirming that Rudradatta’s ideas of nonviolence and the love story were more important for Desai in creating Bharelo Agni than the theme of the uprising.
Desai, however, deserves credit for successfully describing the social and cultural climate of nineteenth-century India. The village of Vihar, Rudradatta’s ashram, his students, the Company Sarkar’s actions and armies, a missionary like Johnson and his activities—all wonderfully add up to complete the picture of the colonial era.

One noticeable flaw in Desai’s novel construction is his habit of presenting long commentary about life, love, society or any other matter of general interest. He undoubtedly has an occasion to write the lengthy comments—usually, the commentary is related to the actions of novel’s characters—yet, the intrusive narration makes one wonder why Desai does it so often. Some examples are as follows:

A. Every generation believes that the younger generation has become wild and uncontrollable. Relationships between man and woman always receives such criticism; yet, one must pay attention to the fact that people have always expressed love, a universal emotion, in various ways all over the world, in every era. One generation is not morally superior to any other. (Desai, 76)

B. Manners reflect a community’s prominent character. People of every community behave according to their age, education and position. And that conduct of theirs reflects the standard of their civilisation. The question whether Hindustan is civilised or not can be conclusively answered by observing the elegant, elaborate and beautiful civility practised by Hindus and Muslims—a ceremony that foreigners may find meaningless and complicated. The polite formalities that go on between the guest and the host, in India and in Asia, have come to be known as a grand spectacle. Some may find its exaggeration ridiculous. (Desai, 83)

C. Our short life results from the combination of numerous forces and synthesis of many elements. When someone dies, everything vanishes with the human body! If it would be true, God and nature both could be insane, immature or wasteful. If life ends with death, it would be a complete waste. Is such a waste fair? When someone dies, a universe ends with that person’s death. Who else, but a devil would enjoy the sport of eliminating a universe along with a person? A devil cannot be behind our life and death, and hence, we can say that blind nature must be carefully preserving the essence of our life somehow somewhere. (Desai, 296)

D. What is better: love or principles? What is greater: sacrificing love or sacrificing principles? Can we say that someone has betrayed principles, when her creed is to offer everything for the sake of love? Isn’t love a great emotion? Doesn’t it stand for an eternal ideal? Who is greater than a lover? (Desai, 307)

E. One war destroys the worlds of thousands of human beings. To win power over a piece of land, thousands have to lose all that they had artfully created in their life—the loss of all that for gaining fickle power. One human being represents one entire world! The blaze of war destroys numerous such worlds. How can anyone enjoy a regime born out of such violence? And, can such rule bring good to people? Yet, people all over have become warmongers! (Desai, 326)

All the above example passages appear in the novel as if a visionary narrator is talking to the readers of the novel. These are not dialogues, but plain prose offered to people as if it is fodder for the readers’ minds to ruminate on later. Desai has scattered such nuggets of
wisdom throughout the novel. Probably, Desai never realised his flaw, or, it is more likely that he continued with this practice because it did not hamper his popularity in any way. In his lifetime, Desai had become such a popular writer that all such prose passages from his novels were published as a volume of ‘quotable quotes’, a compendium of wise words from Desai.

Desai often uses melodrama and unexpected turn of events to serve the purpose of writing a thrilling work of fiction. He has occasions to use these tricks in Bharelo Agni because it is a novel revolving around events like military coup, battles and conspiracies; moreover, a passionate love story runs through the novel. Some of the incidents that seem highly dramatic, and at times improbable, are discussed below.

The first overtly dramatic scene in the novel occurs when Peters, the Company’s military officer, decides to shoot Rudradatta in front of villagers. Peters continues counting till twenty-five, the number at which a soldier is supposed to kill the guru. The mounting tension of number-counting lasts for about two pages of the novel. In between, Desai describes Rudradatta’s calm and collected countenance, Tryambak’s anger, villagers’ comments and so on. The moment Peters reaches the number twenty-four, everyone hears a loud report of a gunshot. Desai ends the chapter there. The readers find out that what happens after the gunshot in the next chapter. Of course, Rudradatta is unhurt as the priest Johnson rushes in to save the situation. The strategy used by Desai here is typical of someone who is serializing the novel in a periodical. One can easily guess how eager the periodical’s readers would be to read the outcome of the gunshot, something that they would read in the next issue of the periodical. At many places, the writer uses the ploy of suspending the readers in anticipation and curiosity, especially at the end of a chapter, so that they eagerly lap up the next thread of the story and turn the page.

A ridiculously mawkish scene is the one in which Florence of Nightingale visits injured Gautam at the war front. The incident reads as follows, Although Gautam was not seriously injured, Nightingale visited him and wrapped a fresh bandage on the gash on his head. Her kindness jogged Gautam’s memory of his dead mother, filling his eyes with tears.

‘Brave soldier, what’s the matter? Everyone is showering praise on you today! Why are you crying?’ saying this, Nightingale wiped Gautam’s eyes.

‘You remind me of my mother.’

Even murderers and executioners become sentimental while remembering their mother. A kind-hearted soldier’s tears flowfreely when talking about the woman who gave him birth and raised him. Although rarely, great conquerors also resort to shedding tears.

‘Will you remember your European mother after returning to Hind?’ Nightingale asked, wiping away Gautam’s tears.
‘Yes I will. You are like Ganga and Jamana, the holy rivers. Anyone who dies in the war after meeting you will definitely reach heaven.’

‘If mothers set their eyes on battlefields even once, they would not let a single war take place anywhere,’ gazing at the horizon, Nightingale uttered prophetic words. (Desai, 29-30)

Desai could have made this encounter less sentimental, and in doing so made it more plausible. Apart from Nightingale, historical characters like Tatya Tope and Rani Lakshmibai also make appearances, but they do so to push the plot forward, unlike the scene quoted above. In addition, at the end of the scene, the noble nurse speaks ‘prophetic words’ which do not ring right in the way presented.

Desai also presents many co-incidences in the novel, where characters end up meeting each other at unexpected places to save a situation. In Bharelo Agni, at a couple of places, such accidental meetings seem implausible. For example, when Gautam is travelling to north-eastern parts of India, in the middle of his journey, he meets a ‘merchant, who came in riding a camel’, at a dharmashala. This man, disguised as a merchant, is none other than Saiyad, Gautam’s fellow soldier in the platoon. Yet, when Gautam begins talking with Saiyad, Gautam takes a long time to recognise his friend. In a similar incident, when Gautam is at Prayag to immerse Mangal Pandey’s bones in the Ganga, he first meets Saiyad. After the bone immersion, Saiyad takes him to a Brahmin who begins talking to Gautam about performing a puja. After a while, the Brahmin reveals himself as Mahavir, Rudradatta’s friend. This game of camouflage and revelation, in both the above quoted cases, seems unnecessary. Desai could have written about these encounters in a more realistic manner.

The most implausible and sentimental of coincidences depicted by Desai is the one where Kalyani and Tryambak meet Gautam at the battlefront. They also make a strange claim that they had played a role in saving Gautam from a gunshot the previous day. In addition, when the final battle begins, Kalyani, in the clothes of a soldier, joins Gautam for the fight—all this seems farfetched in a novel written by a writer of Desai’s caliber. The battle-scene develops as follows:

Gautam decided to be the leader of the mission. Before he gathered his men for the attack, he heard a voice,

‘Gautam!’
Looking at the person who called out, his eyes widened.

‘Gautam, I am with you,’ said Kalyani, dressed as a soldier. Gautam easily recognised her.

‘You go away from here, Kalyani. This place is not for you,’ said Gautam.

‘Why should I leave now? And, where do I go? You tell me, where should I go?’
‘I am going to attack the big guns.’
‘That is good. You should do it. I will also join you.’
Gautam kept staring at Kalyani. A soldier rushed in and announced,
‘Their left lines are making a retreat.’
‘Good. Keep attacking them. I will lead my company from the middle.’
‘But they are still firing cannon balls.’
‘I will put an end to that firing.’
Gautam gave a loud command, and in a moment, a team of soldiers speeded towards the cannons.
Gautam told Kalyani, who was running next to him,
‘Kalyani, death is awaiting us!’
‘I would love to die with you.’ (Desai, 315)

Such dramatic situations, which do not seem probable, could have been avoided to make the work more convincing.

An often repeated and ridiculous phrase in the novel is ‘I will go and save him’ or ‘I will go and bring him out of the jail’, spoken by various characters at different stages of the novel, making it sound like a joke. When Gautam is in Peters’ custody, Kalyani sends Tryambak to bring Gautam out of the priest’s house. (Surprisingly, he manages to do it.) When Mangal Pandey is in jail, Gautam announces that he would go and get Mangal out of the jail and then starts a long journey to the city where Mangal is incarcerated. When Gautam is in a prison, Kalyani expresses a wish to Rudradatta that she wants to go and make Gautam free. Desai makes the characters speak these ambitious words because he wants to project them as brave and determined. The problem, however, is in the way the characters express their wish and the frequency with which they do it.

Although critics have recognized flaws in Bharelo Agni, they have appreciated the writer’s plot construction skills. Desai’s creates fascinating plots with ease. Among Gujarati writers, Desai obviously possess superior skills in plot construction. He reveals the story dramatically and even when a significant incident is not taking place in the story, the novel remains interesting to the reader. (Doshi, 228)

Desai’s novels describe a variety of characters, inviting a comparison to G. M. Tripathi’s works. His women characters are usually lively, beautiful, cultured, bright and affectionate; whereas, his male characters are muscular, shy, awkward, educated and driven by a passion. Desai has shown true mastery in creating minor characters, because he portrays them realistically, and they help him in depicting a true picture of society. In addition, the unusual characters like occultists, burglars, outlaws, men who live in disguise, and mysterious characters with a strange past make Desai’s world exciting. (Doshi, 249)
Before writing his novels, Desai did his homework well to depict a proper picture of the novel’s settings. “I am not a historian, but I am a student of history. While writing stories, I try best to give justice to history,” writes Desai in *PahadanaPushpo*. (Doshi, 252)

The overall success of *Bharelo Agni* is in giving its readers a good idea of the nineteenth-century society and explaining the reasons behind the famed revolt. In dialogues and commentaries, Desai discusses the British Raj’s failures and successes. He exposes how the revolt was supported by the peshwas and Mughals for their self-interest. Gautam and Kalyani’s playful, yet tragic, love story immerses the readers in an emotional roller coaster. Thus, like all classics, *Bharelo Agni* has informed and entertained its readers for generations.

3. The Characters of the Novel:

**Rudradatta: Gandhi at a Wrong Time?**

Essentially, *Bharelo Agni* is a novel about Rudradatta and about his ideas of love and nonviolence. This can be safely and pithily concluded for two obvious reasons. First, the novel begins with Rudradatta, and second, it ends shortly after his death. Desai begins the novel as if introducing a legendary character of past:

> No one knows Rudradatta today. About three decades ago, however, if a child had inquired about him, someone would have at least given sketchy information about Rudradatta. Perhaps, that child’s father would have answered, ‘My grandfather was under Rudradatta’s tutelage.’ (Desai, 01)

And, once Rudradatta’s dies in the novel, Desai sums it up, after completing the formality of bringing an end to Gautam and Kalyani’s love story. Desai does not go on to inform us about the further development and failure of the uprising, since the aim of writing a historical novel is secondary; the primary aim is to broadcast ideas of nonviolence through Rudradatta. The love story helps the writer in reaching out to a wider audience. The setting of the uprising is apt, as it was an armed revolt, easily providing a contrast to Rudradatta’s ideas.

Rudradatta is depicted as an enigma, a guru about whom nothing was known for sure. He appears as a genius to whom scholars rush to solve cryptic and challenging philosophical questions; he is widely travelled; he is highly regarded by all power-holders, whether Mughals or peshwas; he is impecably honest, observing strict aparigrah, refusing gifts even from kings. Rudradatta’s quiet influence is so strong in the day’s milieu that Vihar, the village where his ashram is situated, owes its growth to Rudradatta.

We learn this at the outset, but Desai cleverly and gradually reveals many mysteries about Rudradatta, drawing the readers’ interest in the guru. When Tatya Tope visits the ashram, Rudradatta’s granddaughter and students learn that the guru once trained soldiers, rode horses and fought battles. Desai writes about the enigmatic guru,

> Rudradatta was renowned for the purity of his soul and for his scholarship. Few knew, however, about this brahmarshi’s role in those days’ political movements; and hence, Rudradatta emerged as a mysterious character.
Many believed that Rudradatta had played a significant role in the last war of the peshwas, in the Company’s wars with Sindhiyas, Holkars and Bhonsales, in the skirmishes with the thugs and Pindharis and in the conflicts with Kabul, Iran and Russia. His name was never mentioned in official documents and correspondence. Many British officers believed that Rudradatta was a figure of people’s imagination, a perfect example of the Hindi’s unruly mind. (Desai, 109)

British administration misunderstands the Guru— they think that Rudradatta is not a person but an idea— and that is how Desai depicts Rudradatta to be. Rudradatta’s character has little or no action in the novel, but throughout the novel, he brings ideas and atmosphere of love, peace and nonviolence. These thoughts carry so much of power that people escape the guru’s aura to save themselves from becoming peace-loving and nonviolent.

The exposition of Rudradatta’s ideas begin early in the novel when Rudradatta turns in Gautam to Peters, a British military officer, and advises Gautam to be truthful and nonviolent. At more than one place in the novel, Rudradatta regrets that essential qualities of the Brahmins are lost and they are living the life of the Kshatriyas. Hence, he dislikes that his Brahmin students join the military. When Mangal insists that Rudradatta should take the lead and guide young men in their fight against the Company, Rudradatta argues,

‘My son, even after Parashuram annihilated Kshatriyas from the surface of earth, two Kshatriya families survived. They spawned enough descendants to occupy the entire earth once again. Tell me, what did Parashuram do later?’

‘I can’t understand you.’

‘Parashuram threw away his axe and began a tapasya. You, too, should begin a tapasya, if you want to free earth from the Kshatriyas.’ (Desai, 72-3)

In the idea of eliminating the Kshatriyas from earth, Rudradatta doesn’t recommend eliminating the people of a caste. He envisions a world in which conflicts don’t exist, weapons don’t exist and wars don’t exist. Such utopian world can be achieved only with by extreme efforts to bring peace, what Rudradatta calls ‘tapasya’, not by battles. Battles result in more battles; violence begets violence. Rudradatta repeats the message to Lakshmibai and says that he would lead a war against the Company without using weapons. The most significant action Desai has given to Rudradatta’s character is that of destroying an armoury, an act that gives evidence of his commitment to nonviolence. Rudradatta justifies his decision to destroy the armoury in the following dialogue.

‘Guruji, you should let this [armoury] be put to a good use,’ said Tryambak.

‘I wish the same.’

‘How?’

‘I want to destroy all this.’
'All this will be wasted, then!'

'The world will celebrate the occasion when all the armaments will be destroyed from the surface of earth.'

'Why?'

'The power that we gain with the help of weapons is trivial—as trivial as the weapons themselves. Human beings will be free of all beastly traits the day they get rid of weapons.' (Desai, 235)

Rudradatta’s ideology of nonviolence with reference to the uprising is not without its confusing nuances. As argued above, at most places, Rudradatta is against violence in general and does not support the revolt because it is an armed revolt. Whereas, he also seems to be against the revolt because he does not want powers like the peshwas and princely states regain their dominance. He even justifies the foreign rule as a force that would eventually bring in a state run by people. Rudradatta shares his thoughts with Tatya Tope,

‘...I certainly feel that if these numerous small, insignificant states of Hindustan disappear, it would not be a great loss to us. The excesses of these states have sunk our ship in past, and future too seems bleak if they gain power once again. Let the wheel of time crush them for good.’ (Desai, 105)

Rudradatta’s goodness and magnanimity reach a height when Shankar shoots him. Rudradatta stops Tryambak from killing Shankar and confesses that Shankar, his killer, is the one who once taught him about the absurdity of violence. Although, this seems a contrived scene in the novel, Desai has effectively described an emotionally moving scene that befits Rudradatta’s personality.

At the outset, it seems Desai has created Rudradatta to profess Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy. Desai was deeply influenced by Gandhi, though he himself never participated in political struggles or social movements. Desai writes in MadhyahnanaMrigajal, his autobiography, “I cannot call myself a Gandhian, but Gandhi’s ideas have deeply affected me. I believe that Gandhi’s ideas can definitely help in solving our national problems.” (Doshi, 112)

Critics have raised some valid questions about Rudradatta’s characterisation: Is it believable that someone like Gandhi, upholding love and nonviolence, can exist in the middle of the nineteenth-century India? Does such a character seem plausible even in a work of fiction that is about that era? Vishvanath Bhatt comments, “Desai worships the idea of ahimsa. In his obsession for ahimsa, he has committed anachronism in novels like Thug and Bharelo Agni.” (Doshi, 117)

The idea of nonviolence influenced Desai so deeply that he has written other works on the same theme. His novel Kshiti[1941], centred around the cultural conflicts between Arya and Naga cultures and a clash between Vedic religion and Buddhism, professes the practice of
nonviolence. Sundaram, an eminent poet and critic says, “Even if these ideas [of nonviolence] were present then, the writer’s treatment is evidently like the present day ideas of peace. Moreover, one has to consider how proper it is to ascribe thoughts like ‘War is non-Aryan’ and ‘Creation cannot incorporate acts of violence’ to Arya civilisation and life-view.” (Joshi, 493)

The debate about ‘anachronism’ in Rudradatta’s ideas and personality raged for long, and hence, Desai presented a defense in the fourth edition of Bharelo Agni. In the preface, Desai says that even after receiving critical comments, his belief that the idea of nonviolence could exist in the nineteenth century has become stronger. Desai believes that ‘a movement towards a nonviolent life’ is, in fact, the true definition of civilisation. Desai finds roots of nonviolence in Krishna’s message of the Gita; in the Indian philosophy that advises to go on performing ‘karma’ without expecting any benefits; and, in the tradition of ‘renunciation’. How can a culture that has seen renouncers and religious leaders like Buddha and Mahavir can eliminate nonviolence from its way of thinking, asks Desai. Then, Desai interrogates the roots of Gandhi’s nonviolence and says that although Gandhi was a great soul, his ideas were not entirely original but were products of a civilisation, and the same civilisation can produce a Rudradatta in the nineteenth century. (Desai, VII-VIII)

Providing various hints in the novel Bharelo Agni, Desai has attempted to convey that he has drawn his idea of nonviolence from Buddhist thoughts. For example, the village where Rudradatta’s ashram is situated is Vihar, which means a Buddhist temple or monastery. Desai has named the heroic chief protagonist as ‘Gautam’, which is Buddha’s name. Rudradatta’s personal ammunition is stored in a Buddhist cave. Rudradatta’s act of destroying the ammunition is symbolic of Buddhist ideas of nonviolence demolishing the armaments, even inviting self-destruction while doing so. At the end of the novel, when Gautam fully understands the futility of war, when he finally announces that with love we can win everyone, Desai recreates the image of the great King Ashoka, who adopted Buddhism in a similar manner after a bloody war. Critics have ignored these obvious Buddhist allusions.

Dipak Mehta, a literary critic, also offers a simple yet strong case against those who see anachronism in Rudradatta. Mehta says that throughout the novel, Desai does not show that nonviolence was a dominant thought during the uprising. Even in the middle of a simmering revolt, in any era, one person like Rudradatta can easily profess nonviolence. (Mehta, 37)

Through the lens of Mehta’s argument, one can observe that Rudradatta cannot influence the course of the armed uprising in the novel in any way. We do see Tryambak taking an oath to quit weapons forever, but his decision, too, is more emotional than one because of conviction in Rudradatta’s ideas. Gautam’s dislike for wars and weapons emerge at deathbed, where he announces that he has quit the violent way. He does not live to walk the talk. Thus, in a way, throughout the novel, Rudradatta remains a lonely ascetic-like figure preaching the idea of nonviolence. One person believing in nonviolence can exist anywhere and in any period of history. This observation should convince anyone that Rudradatta and his ideas are neither anachronistic nor unconvincing for nineteenth-century India.

Although the idea requires further research and exploration, one cannot help making a conjecture that Desai might have thought of Rudradatta, an armed revolutionary turning into
Gautam and Kalyani: The Dilemma between Duty and Love

Gautam, Rudradatta’s rebellious student, and Kalyani, Rudradatta’s granddaughter, give the novel a love story and a few romantic scenes that have played a significant role in making the novel popular for generations of readers. Gautam’s classic dilemma of making a choice between his duty to be at the battlefront or to be with Kalyani, his beloved, also provides the novel a conflict, commonly found in literary works of high merit. The romantic relationship gives Kalyani an opportunity to play the role of a devoted and sacrificing woman, who succeeds in winning readers’ affection and reverence. That Gautam and Kalyani’s relationship turns out to be a tragic one, and the fact that the ominous signs of this tragedy flicker throughout the novel, lend a grandeur to both the characters. These elements make Bharelo Agni a fascinating novel involving human emotions and drama, saving it from becoming a dry historical fiction about the uprising that took place in 1857.

Gautam may be a Brahmin who had strong qualities of a Kshatriya, he may be a brave soldier who has spurned the comforts of home and hearth to fulfill his dream of becoming a soldier, yet, right since beginning, Desai has depicted Gautam as a sensitive man. In the middle of the Crimean war, after the victory in a grand battle, Desai reveals a human side of the hardy fighter:

Sitting on a rock, Gautam gazed at the wide ocean ahead. He stared at the ocean; after a while, the ocean faded away. Gautam saw his home, in a village thousands of miles away from where he sat. The crimson evening sky; the dark, snake-like, shining waters of the Black Sea; the eternal noise of rolling waves—nothing touched his heart. Kalyani’s image rose in his mind.

‘You want to go away leaving everything behind,’ Kalyani said, wiping away her tear. She was tired of arguing with Gautam and defeated by his stubborn ideas.

‘Yes, but why are you crying? I suffer a great deal when I see you crying. I want to experience war. Let me go and fight in one, and then I will return to you all.’

A cuckoo’s sweet song twittered in Gautam’s ears; and, on the other hand, war cries and drums called him out. Both the forces pulled him. Where should he go?

‘Okay. If you don’t want me to go to war, I won’t.’

The cuckoo won. The bird understood the value of her song. She knew that Gautam’s passion for war would raise its head again and trouble him. He would not enjoy the bird’s song for long. It was likely that one day the storm
would drown the cuckoo and her song. What would happen if such devastation came about in their life?

Kalyani compassionately thought about Gautam’s dilemma. A woman is naturally kind-hearted; she doesn’t have to make an effort to be kind.

‘Okay, then. You do what you want to.’

‘I will always think of you. Will you remember me?’

Kalyani did not reply. Sneaking out of Vihar in darkness, Gautam looked back a couple of times. He saw Kalyani standing at the place of their last meeting. Gautam looked back for the last time before vanishing in the dark. She still stood there. (Desai, 35)

The scene similar to one quoted above is repeated twice more in the novel in different contexts, with the same consequences: Gautam leaving Kalyani to fulfill his calling to be a soldier; and Kalyani, sacrificing her wish to enjoy conjugal love to let Gautam live his ambitions.

Gautam’s mental struggle to make a choice between domestic bliss and rough soldierly life must be tough for him, if not traumatic. Eventually, with Kalyani’s support and encouragement, he chooses the harsh life. Yet, when Gautam is in the middle of exploding artillery, he thinks of Kalyani’s lovely eyes; and, when he is with Kalyani, he misses guns and bugles.

These vacillations, which he has been experiencing since early twenties, affect Gautam’s mind. Desai has shown how, due to the agony of making a choice between duty and love, Gautam’s mind ends up indulging in the dreams of a wedding. The writer mentions two dream sequences in which Gautam weds Kalyani; and once, at the end of the novel, a dazed and injured Gautam is shown lost in a reverie about his wedding with Kalyani. It should be noted that Desai does not show even once that Kalyani, a sensitive woman, fantasising or dreaming about her wedding or marital love; on the contrary, Gautam, a man, a brave soldier, suffers from such moments of visions more than once. One such long dream sequence is quoted below:

Gautam’s legs shivered with excitement. He wished to rush towards the attractive woman, forgetting his calling to be at the warfront. He forgot where he was, what time it was and who he was. He was immersed in Kalyani. He could not control the desire to embrace her; he leapt forward and took her in arms, passionately crushing her body against his chest. He experienced the pleasure of love and beauty for the first time—and then, in a moment, Kalyani moved away, laughing. He realised that his embrace held nothing; his hands touched nothing.

Gautam opened his eyes. A jackal was crying in the village. Was it a dream, he wondered. The darkness suggested that the hour was past midnight. How long was the dream? Did he really see Kalyani making a mala? Was that also a dream? Will the
dream turn out to be true? And, if it was bound to be true, shouldn’t he gladly accept his destiny? (Desai, 186)

When it becomes clear that the revolt will take lives of many, Gautam assumes that he would be a martyr soon. As a result, strangely, he insists that Kalyani should get married to Tryambak. This is an unexpected suggestion, giving rise to a few uncomfortable conjectures, because once Kalyani has already said that she treats Tryambak as a ‘younger brother’. In spite of this, throughout the novel, Gautam urges Kalyani to marry Tryambak. In addition, whenever Gautam discusses the possibility of her wedding with Tryambak, Kalyani does not seem shocked by the suggestion, nor does she repeat that she is a sister to Tryambak. This unclear relation between Kalyani and Tryambak indicates that probably Desai wanted this nuanced liaison of Gautam-Kalyani-Tryambak to be a love triangle, but for some reasons he has left it unexplored. It is unlikely that Desai deliberately left this ambiguity in relations for the readers to imagine various possibilities.

Since he is the heroic chief protagonist of the novel, Gautam plays an important role in the revolt. A rebel, Gautam has sought freedom from Rudradatta’s influence early in life. Although once he discusses the revolt with Rudradatta, he does not doubt the action of uprising, the intentions of its leaders or the use of violence to fight the Company. If he hesitates to join the battle, it is for the sake of Kalyani’s future; he does not hesitate to fight against the Company because Rudradatta disapproves it. Gautam’s consuming passion is, clearly, to overthrow the Company Sarkar. In this, he seems to be influenced by his friend and fellow soldier Mangal Pandey.

Desai has employed Gautam’s death for the purpose of reiterating Rudradatta’s thoughts, as he has done with Mangal Pandey’s death. To achieve this aim, he projects Gautam in the textbook image of the King Ashoka, one who opted for the path of peace and love as preached by Buddhism after the traumatic experience of human massacre. Like Ashoka, Gautam walks around the maidan, where the battles had taken place, listening to the cries of pain and watching bodies quiver before death. Making his way through numerous dead bodies strewn along, Gautam understands the futility of war, violence and weapons. Eventually, Jackson, his old foe, attacks him with a dagger, even as Gautam is offering him water to drink. This act of retaliation makes Gautam realise that violence begets violence, and his guru was right.

Rudradatta’s granddaughter, Kalyani, represents the supremely virtuous Arya woman, a figure that easily appeals to educated Gujarati readers, and more so to Desai himself. Desai’s fondness and reverence for the ‘beautiful Brahmin girl’ is apparent everywhere and in everything that Kalyani does: she is Rudradatta’s darling; she is emotionally attached to all the ashram’s students; she is devoted to Gautam, her love; she is sacrificing, placing her beloved’s ambitions above her personal joy; she is brave, capable of rushing to raging guns in the middle of a battle; she is strong, choosing to live alone for the cause of nonviolence after she loses her would-be in a battle.

In addition, Kalyani is beautiful. Gautam describes her beauty in the following terms:
He had an eyeful of the pretty face that always occupied his mind. The face was soothing like the moon, bright like the Venus and elegant like a pattern of stars; hazy, yet bright aura shone through that face; and, when the face smiled mysteriously, it glowed with a deep, celestial light. The beauty of the whole universe manifested itself in Kalyani’s face. (Desai, 185)

Thus, the novel’s leading lady is an exemplary beauty and virtuousness personified. In the romantic moments between Kalyani and Gautam, physical love is completely absent, not to mention natural, youthful lust. In one of the dream sequences, Gautam expresses a wish to stroke Kalyani’s body, but in doing so, he does not want to pull her off the pedestal of virtues. Kalyani immediately responds that she should assume the form of Krishna—someone whom people love and worship at the same time. Desai has turned their love into devotion, bereft of abject physical desire.

That Gautam and Kalyani’s relation will turn out to be tragic is suggested early in the novel, preparing readers for the misfortune. Tatya Tope was the first one to suggest Kalyani’s tragic fate, while offering a wedding gift for Kalyani. Looking at Kalyani’s face, he turns pale, as if reading her miserable future. Desai wonderfully crafts another indication in the hooting owl’s scene. When she hears an owl hooting in the middle of a night, Kalyani tries to tie seven knots on a thread. According to a folk belief, the thread with seven knots tied at an owl’s seven hoots, if tied around a man’s arm, can save him from seven dangers. Unfortunately, Kalyani misses the last hoot as she drops the thread in the dark of night. The prophetic situation turns out to be true, and Gautam loses his life after a heroic battle, leaving Kalyani alone, the way he always left her.

Given Desai’s simple storytelling technique, it seems unlikely that he kept Kalyani’s relationship with Tryambak ambiguous. Although Kalyani has once declared that Tryambak is like her younger brother, Tryambak does not openly admit this relationship. At the end of the novel, Tryambak reviews his life in the following words:

[Tryambak] had learnt to be hard hearted: He performed Rudradatta’s last rites; he quit weapons and thus gave up his dream to live a soldier’s life; he supported Gautam and Kalyani’s relation, stamping on his emotions. He did all this, so that he could see Kalyani happy. After all the sacrifices, he witnessed Gautam’s death, an occasion that was going to create an ocean of tears. How could he answer Kalyani’s questions? (Desai, 326)

Probably, the potential love triangle of Gautam-Kalyani-Tryambak is left unexplored in the novel. At the end, Tryambak is described as an ‘ascetic living for the sake of Kalyani’.

One of the most disturbing stages in the novel is the one where Kalyani thinks of becoming a sati after Gautam’s death. She says, ‘It is cowardice to live without husband.’ She even calls her death after Gautam as ‘the moment of happiness’. (Desai, 328) This seems shocking, but given Desai’s reverence for extreme sacrifices, it seems plausible that Desai depicts this conflict in Kalyani’s mind. Desai, however, saves the situation by making Kalyani live for the cause of a weaponless mind.
Kalyani chooses to live because it is her ‘duty’ to perpetuate the grand idea that her
grandfather professed, and her would-be husband believed in at the time of death. Once
again, this provides an evidence that Desai’s purpose in writing this novel is to explore the
ideas of love and nonviolence, Gandhian or otherwise.

Gautam could be seen as a metaphor for the uprising and the spirit behind it: youthful
passion, undying energy, love for the motherland and desire for her freedom. Gautam’s
death is the end of the uprising. If we extend the metaphor, Kalyani turns into the great land
of Aryavart: pure, kind and patient. Kalyani’s ceaseless weeping at the end is the weeping of
Motherland, crying at her children’s failure to liberate her, wailing at her fate to remain a
slave of alien powers.

**Tryambak and Lucy: A Fascination for the Exotic**

Tryambak has two important roles to play in the novel. First, he becomes support to Kalyani
after Rudradatta’s death and after Gautam’s death. Second, Tryambak provides a significant
theme to the novel: that of inter-racial love and resultant conflict.

Tryambak Bhatt, a strong and aggressive Brahmin student in Rudradatta’s ashram shows
fierce loyalty to his guru and guru’s daughter. At the beginning of the novel, his devotion for
his guru becomes obvious when he attacks the soldiers of Peter’s company as they come
over to the ashram in search of Gautam. Throughout the novel, Tryambak stands by Kalyani,
supports her relationship with Gautam and provides her much needed companionship after
Rudradatta’s death. His strength and aggression even impress Tatya Tope, who wishes to
employ him in peshwa’s court.

Tryambak’s ambiguous relationship with Kalyani adds complexity to his character. Tryambak,
who is almost the same age as Kalyani, wants to become a soldier and prove it to Kalyani that
he can also achieve admirable feats in a battle ‘like Gautam’. When Kalyani hears that
Tryambak may leave the ashram to go to the peshwa’s court, she gets upset. Tryambak
observes her facial expressions and feels happy to know that Kalyani will miss him. Yet, as a
virtuous and sacrificing man, he twice confronts Gautam and questions his priorities in life.
Tryambak insists that Gautam should get married to Kalyani and fulfill her love. On the
contrary, strangely, Gautam keeps telling Kalyani to get married to Tryambak.

Eventually, Tryambak sacrifices everything that he loves: at his guru’s deathbed, he vows
never to touch weapons and thus quashes his ambition to become a soldier; and, he ‘stamps
on his emotions’ to see Kalyani happy with Gautam. A lonely figure in the end, Tryambak
binds Kalyani by an oath and compels her to live for the cause of perpetuating ideas of love
and nonviolence. At the extreme end of the novel, Lucy appears just for one dialogue,
‘Tryambak, I am with you.’ (Desai, 329) Thus, Desai suggests that Lucy returns to Tryambak,
and his life will not be loveless.

Desai assigns varied tasks to Lucy, a minor character in the novel: she learns Sanskrit from
Tryambak; she teaches English to Tryambak; and, she loves Tryambak, a brown man,
prepared to conquer all odds that may hinder her affection.
Lucy, a dedicated Sanskrit student, has impressed everyone with her diligence and perseverance. Her intentions for learning the ancient Indian language are clear: she not only wants to read Hindu religious texts, but she also wants to translate the Bible into Sanskrit so that Hindu scholars can read it. Tryambak comments at one place that she has learnt enough Sanskrit to go ahead and complete her study of the language on her own. Rudradatta fondly calls her Lakshmi, as is his wont to Indianise English names.

From her demeanour, marked by general curiosity and enthusiasm, one can safely conclude that Lucy must be in late teens. Right since the beginning of the novel, she seems fascinated by Tryambak, a young scholar, who does not reciprocate the feelings. A sprightly girl, she wants to be close to the shy Brahmin, always looking for reasons to call him home for Sanskrit lessons.

Desai, to show how insouciant white women could be, puts bold words in Lucy’s mouth. When Tryambak announces his plan to go away to the peshwa’s court in Brahavart, anxious Lucy takes the initiative and arranges a rendezvous. Tryambak innocently says that he would come over to see the priest’s family before leaving—he says this naively because that is how Desai wants his Brahmin scholar to appear. Hence, Lucy makes it clear that she wants to meet Tryambak alone and ‘in dark’ to talk something specific. At this juncture, Tryambak thinks of Lucy as a pretty girl for the first time,

After she left, Tryambak evoked an image of the girl: her quick gait; her fair, lovely body; her bright, blue eyes; her lively, expressive face. While observing Lucy’s image, he compared her with Kalyani. Who was more beautiful, Krushna or Subhadra? A student of Sanskrit literature, Tryambak remembered the two beautiful women, celebrated throughout Hind. Then, he forcefully focused on daily chores. (Desai, 121)

It should be noted that Tryambak immediately compares Lucy with Kalyani, providing one more reason to assume an ambiguity in his relationship with Kalyani.

The meeting in the dark between Lucy and Tryambak could have turned out to be a seduction scene, but ingénue Lucy saves it by the force of her pure mind, even after taking initiatives to be physically close to Tryambak. After making a loud and clear announcement that she wants to marry Tryambak, before departing, Lucy insists that Tryambak should hold her hand. Reluctantly, Tryambak, who wants to wind up the meeting with a namaskar, gives his hand to Lucy, who ‘grabbed it and squeezed it gently’. (Desai, 128)

What happens next provides Desai an opportunity to add dimensions to the priest Johnson’s character and expose different attitudes the white colonisers have for Indians. Henry, a priest, attacks Tryambak for being physically close to a white girl. Henry is a former army man, now a priest, and his attitude towards Indians is vastly different from that of Johnson’s. One more reason for Henry’s violent bout is his liking for Lucy, a pretty girl.

Because of the attack, Tryambak cannot go to the peshwa’s court. The incident makes Lucy’s love public, causing embarrassment to the brahmachari. Henry, who reports to the mission about Johnson’s activities in Vihar, sees to it that Johnson is out of the village with his family.
Later in the novel, when Lucy meets Tryambak again, she is still the same bubbly girl, still head over heels in love with Tryambak, still keen to marry him, still ready to become a Hindu, still eager to take Tryambak along with her to England. Here onwards, Lucy, however, does not play a role to take the plot forward. At the end of the novel, she surfaces to declare her loyalty to Tryambak. Desai has left the thread of Tryambak’s love story loose, letting the readers imagine what can happen next.

Tryambak and Lucy’s relationship gives Rudradatta an opportunity to think about the consequences of two civilisationally different communities living together for long:

Thinking about Hindustan’s past and future, standing outside his ashram, Rudradatta kept gazing at Tatyasahib’s palanquin. Then, he saw Lucy walking down to the ashram. Not that he was unaware of Lucy’s infatuation for Tryambak, but he did not think Tryambak, a disciplined young man, required to be restrained in any way. Besides, even in this situation, he could see a volcano simmering in Hindustan’s society.

If two people belonging to different religions live in proximity for long, it inevitably leads to mutual attraction. Rudradatta could not ignore the reality that most Muslims living in Aryavart had Hindu blood in them. (Desai, 131)

The Brahmin guru’s anxiety is about losing purity and unique qualities of his race and community. He can obviously see that Lucy has been attracted to Tryambak because of cultural and physical differences. Lucy’s love is for that which she cannot find in her world.

**Mahavirsingh: The Revolt’s Selfish Goals**

Mahavirsingh, a courageous former landholder, orders Rudradatta’s assassination, bringing the end of the prophetic guru. By his character, Desai conveys how the revolt lacks in a single-minded purpose, how its leaders has their own interest in depositing the Company Sarkar, and how such an assemblage of leaders miscommunicate with one another, pushing the uprising to a failure.

Mahavirsingh joins the revolt because of his self-interest. He is in conflict with the Company because the Company’s soldiers have usurped his large estate, forcing him to live first as an ascetic and then as a mercenary. He meets Rudradatta during his years of wandering, becoming friends because they have the common goal of fighting the Company. Desai presents a wonderful contrast between Mahavirsingh and Rudradatta’s approach to the struggle ahead:

One wanted to overthrow the Company; the other sought freedom. One hated the white skin; the other hated the arrogance of the white people. One was agonised by the scheming British administrators; the other was distressed by greedy, selfish, mean and coward Hindus. One believed that the end of foreign rule will save Hind; the other saw deliverance in the patriotic awakening of Hindis. Both, however, wanted to get rid of the foreign rule’s stifling yoke; yet, both were motivated by different emotions to see the end. One was full of vengeance and venom; the other
introspected broadly about past and repented many actions of people and rulers. One possessed an aggressive but unstable force; the other possessed slowly mounting strength. (Desai, 160-1)

These parallels clearly inform us how Rudradatta has a deeper understanding of Indian people and rulers; whereas, Mahavirsingh acts on impulses, and his concerns are shortsighted. According to Rudradatta, Mahavirsingh’s faults are the revolt’s faults, determining its certain failure.

Mahavirsingh and most other leaders are after Rudradatta because they know Rudradatta has a large collection of ammunition; if they can possess that depot of arms, the revolt will receive a powerful boost. In his momentary bout of aggression, Mahavir orders to kill Rudradatta if latter does not relent into giving away the weapons. Shankar, who is assigned the task to assassinate Rudradatta, gladly executes the order because he nurses a personal grunge against the guru.

Mahavirsingh brings out a significant factor behind the revolt’s failure: the lack of a unified vision among its leaders. Desai states more than once in the novel that the revolt fails because its leaders has varied goals to achieve, and most of these goals stem from selfish concerns and short-sighted view, not from grand vision that can rouse people against the Company Sarkar.

**Johnson: The Dubious One**

Johnson, the priest, begins his career as missionary with the aim to convert all of Hindustan to Christianity. Rudradatta, the genius that he is, impresses him so much that it appears Johnson is coloured by Hinduism, undergoing a deeper ‘conversion’ of thoughts and attitude, while technically remaining a Christian.

With the help of Johnson’s character, Desai suggests how the Christian missions and the Company’s administration colluded to gain control over the colonised. Johnson comes to live in Vihar to keep a watch over Rudradatta, a suspicious character for the administration. He also wishes to convince Rudradatta of Christianity’s superiority and convert him to the superior religion because it will help convert many more. Rudradatta, however, with his catholic mindset and scholarship, influences Johnson so deeply that the mission begins suspecting Johnson’s activities. The growing friendship between the two and its consequences are described in the novel as follows:

Gradually, the Christian missionary became fond of Rudradatta. To everyone’s surprise, Rudradatta began teaching the Geeta to the Christian; subsequently, Johnson’s respect for the old man grew. They both often discussed religion, and if Johnson’s knowledge of Hinduism astonished Rudradatta, what Rudradatta knew about the Bible amazed Johnson. The priest passionately argued in the support of his religion, but Rudradatta never spoke against Christianity. While teaching the Geeta, he often quoted the Bible that had incidents or messages similar to the Hindu text. It was unlikely that Rudradatta knew English, yet he was familiar with significant
details of the Bible. If all Brahmins become like Rudradatta, the efforts to promote Christianity would be pointless, thought Johnson. (Desai 17-8)

When the villagers refuse to give a plot of land to let Johnson build his house, Rudradatta talked to the villagers to help the Christian. To quell the villagers’ fears, Rudradatta cogently argues that if mere presence of a priest can shake their confidence in Hinduism, it is better to convert to Christianity soon. Rudradatta’s friendship with Johnson is an evidence of how the ideas of love can win even one’s rival or enemy.

After Johnson’s attitude to Hindus and Hinduism alters under Rudradatta’s influence, his approach to religion becomes syncretic. In his pamphlets and essays, he focuses on eastern philosophy and religious ideas, drawing parallels with Christianity. He even becomes sympathetic of Islam. Thus, from a conservative Christian who thought Hindus to be barbaric, he begins looking for wisdom in Hinduism and other religions.

Even after Johnson’s avowed friendship with Rudradatta, even after his change of heart, one often notices certain actions from Johnson that present him as a dual-faced character. For example, when Tatya Tope visits Rudradatta’s ashram, Johnson comes over to inquire about the guest in a way that appears strange—he does it as he wants to know about the outsider in Vihar. Within a few hours, we have Henry, the conservative priest coming over to Vihar to know about the activities in the village. He attacks Tryambak for talking to Lucy. After a few days, the priest is transferred to another unnamed village, where he takes along Shankar’s son as a servant. This too is a suspicious action because Shankar has worked as the Company’s spy for years. Why does Johnson choose Shankar’s son as a servant? Is it just a coincident? These doubts reach a peak when Rudradatta’s assassination takes place in the same village where Johnson works as a priest. All these factors suggest that either Johnson himself is a dubious character, or some other people manipulate him in a way he cannot understand. Once Johnson becomes sympathetic to Rudradatta and Hinduism, Desai does not directly suggest anywhere that the priest could be a suspicious person; but the incidents in the novel certainly give us such misgivings about Johnson.

**Henry’s Prejudices**

Henry is in stark contrast to Johnson. Although Johnson began his career as a priest in India, considering the ‘heathen’ religion and people to be barbaric, he undergoes a drastic change after meeting Rudradatta. Henry, on the other hand, becomes more conservative, and his disdain for the Hindus become more and more intense:

Henry was an acclaimed soldier and a passionate Christian. He believed that not just entire Hindustan, but all the infidels of the world must be forced to convert to Christianity—this, he said, would create an ideal world. Even the military should be put to use to achieve the goal, he argued. (Desai, 116)

Thus, Henry lives with a typical missionary zeal to deal with Hindus and Hindustan. In the novel, he is behind two significant incidents: first, he attacks Tryambak; second, he manages to transfer Johnson out of Vihar and out of Rudradatta’s sphere of influence.
Behind his attack on Tryambak, the clear reason is a racial bias tinged with sexual jealousy: How can a brown man touch a white girl? How can ‘our’ woman fall in love with ‘their’ man? Henry’s such prejudices and jealousy provoke him to attack Tryambak. Moreover, he had overheard Rudradatta and Tatya Tope talking about political scene in India, making him suspect everything and everyone in Vihar.

Henry’s character plays a significant role of presenting a contrast to Johnson’s: one is aggressive, the other is affable; one is stubbornly prejudiced, the other is open to new ideas; one is out there to spread Christianity, the other turns into a student of various religions.

**Peters and Jackson: A Friend and a Foe**

Peters and Jackson, two military officers play contrasting roles in the novel. Right since beginning, Peters comes across as a generous soul, always encouraging Hindi soldiers as a good leader should. When he leads the Hindi platoon to the Crimean war, Peters personally recommends that the Hindi soldiers should be given an opportunity to fight the Russians. Peters’ faith in his soldiers is proved right when Gautam and Mangal blow off the Russian ammunition and bring along a map important to plan further strategy.

Similarly, Peters tries hard to save Gautam and Mangal from death sentence and succeeds in getting the execution postponed. At every stage Peters protects Gautam: he releases Gautam without any apparent reason in Vihar; and, he frees Gautam after he is caught at the site of Mangal’s cremation. In the second instance, Peters’ appearance seems melodramatic, but then it is one of a number of such unexpected happenings in the novel.

On the other hand, Jackson is arrogant, condescending and vindictive. He often humiliates Hindi soldiers, casting aspersions at every small opportunity. When, in the dark of night, the platoon is waiting for a chance to attack the Russians, Jackson suggests Mangal and Gautam should go ahead to the Russian camp. He says this not because he trusts them, but because he wants to push them to a danger and thus prove them stupid and incapable. After Gautam and Mangal succeeded in the feat, Jackson cannot appreciate his Hindi subordinates, the way Peters can. Desai writes:

> Jackson did not acknowledge Gautam’s courage or cleverness. Like most people, he could not appreciate others; on the contrary, Jackson felt that he himself could have done the same job better and faster. What was commendable in penetrating the alert Russian defence while hiding in bushes? To adjust to a place and situation was a soldier’s duty. Jackson felt a deep resentment for a perceived injustice: the Hindus stole the honour that was rightly mine. (Desai, 29)

Eventually, Jackson, in an inebriated state, touches the vessels that Mangal uses to take bhang. He cannot bear to think that his subordinate brown soldier believes that a white man’s touch can make something impure:

> ‘ Bloody swine! You work under me, don’t you? How dare you insult me? You will have to suck the cartridges with cow and pig fat, do you know?’
Jackson kicked the small pestle used for pounding bhang and picked up a mud bowl with bhang in it. His companion began laughing.

When Jackson called him a ‘cooler’ and a ‘swine’, Mangal, in spite of simmering anger, kept himself in check. But, when the sozzled Englishman touched bhang, Mangal became uncontrollably furious. He could have tolerated Jackson touching his meals, but Jackson touched bhang, Bhagawan Shankar’s gift to His followers. (Desai, 36)

This ensues a scuffle with Jackson. Such atmosphere, Desai wants to say, was the trigger than led to the uprising. Most British military officers humiliate the Hindi soldiers, and they hold deep prejudice against them. They discriminate against Hindi soldiers, while the white soldiers are the privileged ones, keeping a watch over their brown counterparts.

At the end of the novel, Gautam offers water to the injured and defeated Jackson, who is taking his last breaths. Noticing that Gautam is off guard, Jackson thrusts his dagger in Gautam’s chest, giving him a deathblow. For Jackson, Gautam is a brown man who has ‘betrayed the Company’.

Jackson’s revenge teaches a lesson to Gautam, who fully understands love’s power and war’s futility, which his guru preached. Desai has cleverly used Jackson’s character to show how hostility can bring forth violence and death. The enmity that has its roots at the beginning of the novel brings the end of Gautam, the novel’s heroic chief protagonist, and with it that of the novel.

The Historical Characters: A Link to the Imaginary World

Without its historical characters, Bharelo Agni would not have succeeded in evoking the setting of the revolt. At times, when the characters of the bygone era wander around in the novel, one feels Desai could have done without such dramatic events. Most tactless of all these encounters is the one in which Florence Nightingale meets Gautam; another similar incident is Rani Lakshmibai’s visit to Rudradatta’s ashram. Of these, the latter entry could be justified because after meeting Lakshmibai, Rudradatta decides to step out of Vihar. Desai implements the visit for causing a movement in the novel. Yet, Lakshmibai’s late-night entry, where she is disguised as a soldier only to reveal herself after a few moments, seems too melodramatic to be depicted by a distinguished novelist. One can also concede that such tricks help Desai in gripping the readers’ attention in a novel that was serialized in a periodical.

We first meet Mangal Pandey as Gautam’s friend. The friendship begins at Rudradatta’s ashram, where Mangal Pandey was Gautam’s senior in past. Mangal Pandey would be an essential character in a novel about the uprising because his actions triggered the revolt, perhaps sooner than the actual plan. Like any novelist, Desai has taken liberty with the character of Mangal Pandey, depicting him to be Rudradatta’s student and associating him with Gautam, a fictitious character. Desai also claims Mangal to be a student of Nyaya philosophy. A habitual bhang user, Mangal is shown to be a strong, brave and aggressive soldier. He is easily enraged, a weakness that could be due to regular intake of bhang.
Mangal’s actions are essential to the story, as his confrontation with Jackson lays bare how the Indian soldiers resented the white officers. In their punishment for attacking a superior, and in escaping together from military custody, Mangal and Gautam become bosom friends, taking a vow to overthrow the Company. Later in the novel, Desai shows Mangal communicating with Rudradatta and resisting the guru’s influence that is assuaging his natural aggression. In fact, Mangal runs away from Vihar to escape Rudradatta’s ideas of love and nonviolence.

Later in the novel, Desai vividly describes the day when the thirty-fourth platoon is given the new bullets, which are believed to have greased with animal fat. Mangal Pandey’s change of heart on the day of his hanging is manipulated to validate of Rudradatta’s ideas.

In showing Mangal Pandey as a friend of Gautam, the heroic chief protagonist, lies Desai’s masterstroke as a novelist. This association easily involves all the other characters in the development of the novel’s plot and that of the uprising. That Mangal is a former student of Rudradatta is significant, but more for the moments of revelation at the time of Mangal’s death. Thus, Mangal Pandey becomes a ‘real’ link to connect Desai’s ‘imaginary’ world with the uprising.

Both Tatya Tope and Rani Lakshmibai visit Vihar to convince Rudradatta to lead the revolt. We later learn that their intention in dragging Rudradatta to the armed conflict is to access Rudradatta’s vast and amazing collection of ammunition. Desai depicts Tope as a sharp, shrewd and strong man of focused intent. Tatya Tope, the peshwa’s attorney, visits Rudradatta and discusses the past and future of India’s power holders. His argument with priest Johnson demystifies the Company’s claims that it has provided a peaceful life to India,

‘The Sikh war ended hardly six years ago. That poor Kamaru was annexed just four years ago. And, till recently, a war with Russians seemed imminent. As if all this is not enough, preparations for a war with China and Iraq have begun. Now you tell me, are the Whites peace-loving people?’ (Desai, 98)

Similarly, Tope attacks the new education system, the new means of transport and Company’s claims of honesty to prove how the Company selfishly serves its own purpose. He tears through all the myths through which the Company justifies its rule.

Rudradatta’s long talks with Tope helps Desai in revealing the guru’s exciting and till then obscured past: how he had fought for the peshwas, and how he had even travelled distant countries to associate with like-minded people, who wanted to oust the Company from India. Rudradatta’s disappointment with the princely states predicts that their loyalty to the comforts offered by the Company and the poor quality of Indian soldiers will result in the revolt’s failure.

As mentioned above, Rani Lakshmibai’s appearance in the novel seems contrived, yet it enhances the work’s popular appeal. Desai shows Lakshmibai bonding with Kalyani for a heart to heart chat, as might happen between two women anywhere. A crafty and observant woman, as a ruler should be, Lakshmibai also thinks of manipulating Kalyani’s love for Gautam and Rudradatta’s love for Kalyani. Such an occasion, however, does not arise.
Lakshmibai succeeds in convincing Rudradatta to step out of Vihar, albeit after Rudradatta’s condition that is incomprehensible to her: Rudradatta insists that he would like to get rid of the Company’s yoke without using arms.

Mangal Pandey, Tatya Tope and Rani Lakshmibai provide a link to the imaginary world Desai has created with the historical events that took place in the 1857 revolt. The characters also add to the enigma of Rudradatta, the apparently ordinary Brahmin teacher, who was once a soldier and fought for the cause of Indian rulers.

4. **THE DEPICTION OF LIFE AND SOCIETY:**

In *Bharelo Agni*, Desai has depicted the general life of nineteenth-century society. More significantly, as is Desai’s wont, he has offered observations about a variety of issues in long narrations that directly talk to readers.

The novel obviously offers a depiction of the ashram life—the school system—present then. Rudradatta’s ashram gives an idea of who took education then and of what. All the students studying in the ashram are Brahmins and they all, including Rudradatta, strictly observe the custom of ‘untouchability’. This becomes obvious in the way Rudradatta treats Johnson, the priest, whenever he visits the ashram. Although the priest is welcome to the ashram, his seat is kept out of the usual passage for the students so that they do not touch him unintentionally. Desai specifically mentions that Rudradatta takes a bath if he unknowingly touches the priest.

The period of studentship is also the time of ‘brahmacharya’, when students take the vow of celibacy. We learn about it from the way Tryambak resists thinking about Lucy. When Lucy’s lovely gait, bright blue eyes and fair body storm his thoughts, Tryambak reprimands himself, ‘How can a brahmachari think about a woman?’

From the novel, it can be said that ashram students learn philosophy—the Nyaya School is mentioned more than once throughout the text. They learn Sanskrit aphorisms and the Gita by heart. Their days of studentship seems to be a long, but a clear number of years is not mentioned anywhere.

The novel does not overtly mention caste roles or caste divides in society. Yet, in some conversations, one can learn about the change society was facing then. Rudradatta regrets that the Brahmins aspire to become soldiers. According to him, this is a loss of essential qualities of Brahmins all over India. Priest Johnson carries a clear impression about Brahmins: they are proud, clever, argumentative religious fanatics. Johnson does not find these traits in Rudradatta and is surprised for that. Johnson’s notions about Brahmins may be prejudiced, but it is worth noting that these prejudices seems common among the foreigners of those days.

Rudradatta himself thinks about people in strict caste roles. In his conversations about the peshwas, he says that peshwas failed because they were Brahmins trying to rule over people; and, then he adds that the Company will fail because it is a trading company trying to rule
over people. He seems to suggest that Kshatriyas are the true power holders and that is how it should remain.

Desai talks at length about the transport system of the day, how it was before the railways and after the railways. He concludes that the previous system of passing through villages, either on foot or by a cart, was better than travelling by train. He argues that trains have made fixed routes to go from one place to another, and such a route turns villages and towns into railway-stations where the train halts for a while. Before the trains, he says, people took a halt at a place and lived there for a couple of days before resuming the journey. This practice, says Desai, strongly connected people. Railways, on the contrary, have scattered people because even when a train halts at a place, we do not get to know the place and the people well. The railways have given us an ‘impression’ of distance between two places, says Desai, because we fail to interact with places and people while travelling. Desai writes,

Before the railways, cities like Pune, Satara, Vadodara, Nagpur, Indore, Gwalior, Agra, Delhi, Kashi and Prayag had an interconnected life. Every day, carriers and agents travelled through these cities with messages, documents and hundis. The traders’ business-branches were scattered everywhere. Wealthy devotees built step-wells, shelters, caravanserais and dharmashalas on the roads. Village panchayats, active in those days, provided guards and escorts to travellers going to faraway destinations. Some of us wrongly believe that people then lived an unhappy life, full of uncertainty because they did not have today’s facilities. (Desai, 93)

Thus, Desai does not whole-heartedly favour the grand development gifted by the British. He also dispels the myth of security and certainty that the modern means of transport seem to bring. Desai lays emphasis on the movements of pilgrims and merchants, who connected and brought different places closer in a society that did not have railways. More than once, Desai speaks about the dharmashalas attached with temples: how the wealthy built them, and how travellers used them for a short stay.

Desai has commented about the Company administration throughout the novel. Through the character of Tatya Tope, the much talked about benefits brought about by the Company are demystified. The Company built railways for the easy movement of its military; it introduced schools to train clerks for its trading centres and administrative offices; its claim of bringing peace was fickle because the wars in Russia, Afghanistan and other places never ended; and, if the Company crushed the nuisance of pindharis and thugs, it appointed corrupt officials who were worse than burglars.

If Desai appreciates the Company rule, it is to profess that such a foreign rule was required to end myriad local rulers’ reign over small territories. The Company’s rule was a required stage to shift to people’s rule. He compares another rule of the ‘foreigners’, that of the Muslims, with the Company’s administration and says that the British administrators could never become a ‘golden thread’ that could connect the populace of our vast country as did Muslim rulers,
‘The British rule hasn’t become the golden thread uniting the people of Hind. Instead, it has turned into a python that swallows people. Such a python cannot move around after gorging itself on people.’ (Desai, 224)

Company’s lust for land and made its rule unpopular, says Desai. It was not sufficient for them, as was with the Muslim rulers, that the local states accepted the Company’s supremacy. They wanted to swallow more and more territories. The British administrators persecuted and eliminated great warrior Shivaji’s descendants in Satara, Raja Ranjit’s Sikh kingdom, Tanjore’s Maratha kingdom, Nagpur’s Bhosales and Jhansi’s Brahmin rulers. Indians could not accept the British administration because it did not show ‘generosity’ to the local states as the Muslim conquerors did. The British kept humiliating the descendants of the peshwas and the Mughals, and they greatly harassed Wajid Ali Shah, the ‘luckless Nawab of Ayodhya’.

Rudradatta, in his dialogues, appreciates the British army’s discipline and planning. Compared to the white soldiers, the Indian soldiers behave like ordinary thugs and streetfighters, he says. Through Gautam’s perspective, more is said in the following words about the kinds of people who had joined the revolt:

True revolutionaries were few. Most others, who had joined the anarchy, had ulterior aims: some wanted to imitate the revolutionaries; some wanted to plunder around in the name of battles; some were keen to pursue a personal vendetta; and, some wanted to participate in the revolt for the sake of glory. Such a gathering of people could not act with discipline; they did not know how to fight battles; they did not have a drive to achieve a goal. Anyone who protested against a white man became eligible to join the revolutionaries. They lacked discipline, a sense of direction, consistency of opinions and solidarity with one another. (Desai, 285-6)

Desai firmly believes in the unity of the Indian culture. He says the following, probably against the popular western argument about fragmented India,

A mysterious hand keeps the universe together; similarly, an old and unfathomable civilisation keeps Aryavart together, preventing it from falling apart in small provinces. A Kashmiri pundit visits Kanyakumari; a Bengali babu often goes to Dwarkadhesh for a darshan. The Aryan thought and culture have resisted space and time, thriving independently. (Desai, 195)

In the novel, the revolters use the Bhairavanath fair to communicate the message of uprising to a large number of people. This, Desai says, was a common and successful practice in those days, when mass media did not exist. Since many festivals fell on the same day all over India, it was easier to initiate movements and agitations, using the fair as a platform. The leaders stationed themselves at various places, skillfully communicating their message. A large gathering of young and old, men and women, made their task easier. We read that the plot of the uprising is discussed about the same time as the Bhairavanath fair. The description of the fair also informs us how the religious fair was also an occasion for entertainment and socializing. Every attendee had a different purpose to visit such fairs.
Thus, Desai’s novel, rich in information and details, gives a fine and convincing picture of the nineteenth-century society and the Company Sarkar’s successes and failures.

5. **DESAI’S BIASES**

Desai was an educated man, and though we do not know about his parents’ education, it is clear that since his father was engaged in some way with publishing business, he, too, had some education. Desai worked as an employee of the Baroda state, an administration that was known for forward thinking leaders. Desai was receptive of the ideas of social change shaping up in India in his days, and his writing reflects these reformatory ideas.

In spite of Desai’s education and forward outlook to most issues, in *Bharelo Agni*, Desai’s views on the issue of sati—crudely called ‘widow burning’—are disturbingly strange. This becomes obvious in the way he describes the death of Gautam’s mother. When Gautam’s father, a soldier, dies because of a fatal injury, his wife becomes almost possessed and decides to die after her husband. Crying ‘Jai Ambe!’, and without whimpering even once, she sat on her husband’s pyre, as if the blazing fire was a fount of soothing amrit.

How Desai has described this particular incident is not problematic, because he is giving us a picture of a woman choosing to die after her husband in the early nineteenth century. Assuming such deaths took place then, the readers may conclude that Desai has vividly described a woman’s devotion to her husband. What follows the description of the incident makes one uneasy. Desai writes two long paragraphs about the custom of sati in glorifying terms:

> It is good that the practice of sati is now abolished. It is indeed good that we no longer see a lovely woman burning herself in the pyre. Yet, in all that we see around us, whether it is earthly or heavenly, the sight of an Arya sati enveloped in raging flames is the most divine sight. World over, people have not known of an emotion as sacred as that of a sati’s. An Arya woman, a member of the weaker sex, scorning death and ignoring the unbearable pain of burning her body, sits on the pyre to free her soul and become one with her beloved. Not only Hindustan, the world will forever imbibe life out of this picture.

> The practice of sati is now abolished in society; but no one can stop women from being satis. The ritual of burning on the pyre has now ceased, but no one can extinguish the yajna fire in which women melt their body. Only a woman can become a sati because her life is a perpetual yajna. She dutifully devotes herself to her beloved. How can such a woman find death difficult? What qualities does the man possess to save himself? He criticises the woman and confines her in a veil; he selfishly shuts her in home. Who is greater between these two? To answer the question, we must ask another
question: what is greater, sacrifice or selfishness? The world will become a habitable place when the man will begin to emulate the self-sacrificing woman. Till then, it will remain a butcher-house full of quarrels, battles and agony. (Desai, 31)

In the first paragraph above, Desai calls sati’s burning a ‘sacred’ act and her pyre a ‘divine sight’, concluding that such devotion will inspire people world over. In the next paragraph, Desai calls all women ‘satis’, now stating that sacrifice and selflessness are essential feminine qualities, and even when women do not literally burn themselves on pyres, their whole life is a burning pyre. In doing this, he awards women the status of being superior to men, because the latter is selfish and despotic, while former, selfless and generous. One cannot fail to note Desai’s Brahminical terminology of ‘yajna’ and ‘sacrifice’, the grand terms he uses to justify women’s exploitation.

Given that Desai’s narrator does not possess a clear, separate individuality in Bharelo Agni, one is inclined to think these to be Desai’s views. Besides, offering such long commentary about life, love, human relations, society and so on is Desai’s habit. Such ‘quotable quotes’ had gained popularity and were culled from all his novels for publication as separate volumes.

It is also noteworthy that at the end of the novel, Kalyani, Gautam’s beloved, also thinks of embracing death after Gautam. Though not explicitly stated, it is clear that Kalyani wants to end her life. Tryambak immediately binds her with a promise to live on. Kalyani argues that she has no purpose left to live because Gautam is dead; she also says that it is ‘cowardice’ to live without Gautam, as if real courage is in dying as a sati. At last, she exhorts Tryambak that he must not prevent her moment of ‘happiness’, that is, the joy of burning herself to death on Gautam’s pyre.

Thus, Desai provides enough evidence of his veneration for the custom of sati. His views on feminine values seem controversial and invite a scrutiny for gender studies.

Another of Desai’s bias reveals itself subtly, not in long comments or spoken dialogues. This is his racial bias, where he, in his veneration for ‘our culture’, the revered Aryan civilisation, interprets a member of the other culture as indulging in inferior passions.

This racial prejudice of the writer can be explored through a comparison between Kalyani and Lucy, two important women characters of Bharelo Agni. Kalyani is in love with Gautam, a Brahmin man, who is trained at the ashram, but later opts for a career in the military. The following passage aptly informs us how Kalyani looks up to Brahmin men. It is a description of Gautam and Tryambak from Kalyani’s point of view:

Both picked up their stoles and prepared to leave. A rudrakshmala hung around their neck. Their long hair covered their ears, flowing up to their shoulders. Putting on their sabots, both the young men began walking down the veranda. Kalyani kept gazing at them: they looked like devout rishis who had just completed their tapasya in the forest; in them burnt the flame of
Brahmins’ virtues. Kalyani loved both the young men. She could sacrifice her life for either of them. (Desai, 142-3)

If Kalyani loves Gautam, a Brahmin young man, her love is also that of a Brahmin woman, a perfect Arya woman. Desai depicts Kalyani as virtues personified: Kalyani is devoted, selfless, sacrificing and always suffering. Her life is a ‘yajna’, one that Desai thinks every Arya woman’s life should be. When Gautam dies, Kalyani, a woman with a sharp mind, a woman who is the granddaughter of a veritable genius, is ready to become a sati. Eventually, she does not choose death, where her ‘happiness’ lies; she chooses to live for the sake of spreading ideas of nonviolence. Significantly, though, she does express a keen desire to die after Gautam.

Moreover, Kalyani’s love for Gautam is never depicted in physical terms; this, even when the couple has crossed the age when most people married then. Gautam is often shown dreaming about Kalyani and about his marriage with her. But, his dreams are about the wedding ceremony or witty, romantic dialogues with her lover, never about satisfying physical desire. As is his wont, Desai philosophises at one place, ‘True beauty is always magnificent and adorabe. We may worship such beauty, but we cannot playfully caress it.’ (Desai, 186) Kalyani, always a ‘sublime presence’ for Gautam, becomes Krishna for him, one whom he worships and loves—but she does not become an ordinary woman who would give him physical pleasure. Their relationship is almost filial, one of asexual affection.

Once in the novel, Kalyani covers tired Gautam’s eyes with her hands, and, at the end of the novel, when Gautam is on the deathbed, she kisses him. This kiss takes place after the oral declaration that they are wedded to each other. Thus, like a true Arya woman, Kalyani preserves her virginity for the man she loves and for the day of her wedding. When that occasion does not materialise, she wants to become a sati, and die a virgin.

The complete idea of Desai’s racial bias becomes clear when we note how Desai has characterised Lucy, a white woman, and her relationship with Tryambak. Lucy, priest Johnson’s daughter, is in love with the Brahmin boy Tryambak. It is noteworthy that Tryambak was not initially in love with Lucy; he develops attraction for the white girl after she articulates her feelings. Tryambak focuses on bringing happiness to Kalyani, an ideal Arya woman.

Desai shows Lucy taking bold initiatives in love, as she invites Tryambak for a rendezvous in dark. She insists that she wants to meet him alone and in dark. After deciding the meeting place, Tryambak does think for a short while about Lucy, but he controls himself, as he is a ‘brahmachari’ and a brahmachari should not think about women. He goes to see Lucy without any special enthusiasm, just to keep his word to a young girl; but Lucy, on the other hand, is eagerly waiting for him at the meeting place. This also gives us an opportunity to compare a Brahmin man’s innocence in matters of love with a white girl’s keenness to meet him ‘in dark’.

After a long talk about religious and cultural differences, Lucy confesses her love for Tryambak during that early morning meeting. The Brahmin, shocked in disbelief at this declaration of love and intention of marriage, finds Lucy’s behaviour ‘shameless’. When
Tryambak says that the relationship is not practicable because of the racial difference, Lucy, significantly, says, ‘A white-skinned person finds brown people attractive.’ (Desai, 126) Obviously, Desai has depicted Lucy’s love as physical love, inferior to Kalyani’s love where bodily attraction does not appear anywhere, not even in dreams. Tryambak doubts Lucy’s love, though briefly, as a conspiracy to convert a respectable Brahmin to Christianity. Eventually, the seduction ends with both the lovers affectionately holding hands, maintaining a physical contact for some time. It was Lucy’s idea that they should hold hands.

That Desai emphasises Lucy’s physical fascination for Tryambak becomes evident once again, when she meets Tryambak alone, this time in bright day light. When Lucy looks at Tryambak, who is kneading bhang on the parapet of a well, she observes the following:

Lucy stared for a moment at Tryambak’s brown body, his arms and the movements of muscles. From Tryambak’s narrow waist, his body became broad at the chest and broader at shoulders. The pure masculinity oozing from his limbs reminded her of Greek warriors. Lucy’s tender, white body wished to touch that brawny physique. (Desai, 250-1)

This scene also ends with Lucy playfully insisting that Tryambak should touch her while handing her over a precious stone, Rudradatta’s gift. Lucy grabs Tryambak’s hand as soon as Tryambak comes close to her.

These incidents clearly reveal Desai’s racial biases: Kalyani’s love is pure and sacred; whereas, Lucy’s love is lust for an exotic body. Kalyani’s relation is a communion of souls; whereas, Lucy’s is driven by physical pleasure. This is so, obviously, because Kalyani is an Arya woman, an embodiment of superior virtues; whereas, Lucy is a pleasure seeker, a typical western woman. In eroticizing a white woman, Desai has succumbed to commonly known stereotypes.

We need to focus on these aspects while discussing Indian texts because we often become victims of a fallacy where we assume Indian writers to be free of prejudices, racial or otherwise; on the other hand, we readily pounce upon western writers’ racism and orientalism. It is easy to blame others for being unjust; besides, it is convenient to win sympathy by becoming victims; on the other hand, we choose to ignore our distorted optics.

6. **A FEW HISTORICAL FACTS**

Although the purpose of this doctoral work is not to test historical facts behind Desai’s novel, the introduction to the novel’s translation offers a few pointers here to inspire other scholars to work in the direction.

Desai studied historical details well about a particular event or locale before writing about it. Hence, when he decided to write about the revolt of 1857, that too in the setting of Gujarat, he must have checked the possibility of relating the revolt with Gujarat. In the novel, Gujarat, as we know it today, does not become a place for any of the battles, yet Desai shows a Gujarati guru and his students getting involved in the famous revolt. One questions if Gujarat
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Tope, Rango Bapuji and Rao Sahib had been active in provoking people of Gujarat against the Company during the years of the uprising. He gives a list of twenty-four such known revolutionaries who were imprisoned by the authorities. The list includes one Tokara Swami, a priest at the temple of Dwarka. Other obvious Gujaratis are Prabhuram, Krishnabhatt, Lallu Ranachhod, Moti Jani and Ambashankar. (Pandya, 1-3) It should be noted that Tokaraswami is also referred to in a conversation between Gautam and Saiyad in the novel. In the conversation, Saiyad informs Gautam that Tokara Swami is going to discuss the possibility of revolting against the British with the co-operation of the Gaekwads. (Desai, 288)

Although the Gaekwads of Vadodara did not participate in the revolt, Bapu Gaekwad did join the revolutionaries, and he had the support of Maganlal Vanio and Nihalchand Jhaveri, two Gujaratis living in Patan and Vadodara respectively. These three had made efforts to capture Vadodara with the help of Patels of Kheda and Indian soldiers who were stationed at Ahmedabad. As many as thirty-five revolutionaries were imprisoned in the Ahmedabad jail in October 1857. (Pandya, 06-07)

A few other battles include one at Dahod led by the local landlord Kanunago; at Devagadh Bariya by the bhils; and, at Dakor in the leadership of one Surajmal. One Garabadadas, the headman of Anand, had revolted against the British, and he was sent to Andaman where he died. Many towns and villages on the bank of the river Mahi were active in the revolt. Most of the people who fought with the British there were Koli Patels. They fought so long and so bravely that the British set fire to many villages out of frustration. (Pandya, 09-11)

An ascetic named Bhabhutgar, who was a priest of Koteswar temple at Bantwa, was also known as one who provoked the local against the British. Mulu Manek, a Wagher, had conquered Dwarka in 1859, becoming a legend in folk literature. With Mulu Manek's death in 1868, the Waghrs lost their last leader. Thus, their battle with the British administration ended then. (Pandya, 24) Believing that Nasasahib Peshwa was hiding in Gujarat, the British administration often searched for him in Dwarka Bet. (Pandya, 19) Nana is believed to be behind the revolt by Okha's Wagher community that lasted till 1868.

In 1865, J. E. Elephant, a magistrate based in Ahmedabad, wrote to the chief of police in Vadodara, "The rebels and Kolis are forming a band. They have connections with Waghrs as well. We have arrested Tokara Swami, who was involved in rebellious activities, from Dwarka. He is now in Vadodara jail." (Pandya, 47)

Tatya Tope also frequented Gujarat, and the British administration had announced to the bhils of Panchmahal that the administration would award Rs. 10,000 to anyone who would help them catch Tatya Tope or Nasasahib. (Pandya, 30)
In Navasari, ‘NarasinghajiniTekari’ is a famous place in the middle of a pond (known as ‘dudhiyutalav’). In 1906, one ascetic called TeheldasBuva cleared wild shrubs and began staying there for his tapasya. It is likely that Tatya had lived at this place for some time. Folklore also suggests that Tatya lived in Chorwad, Saurashtra.’ (Pandya, 40)

We can safely conclude the following from these facts: first, all the above evidence suggests that it is not a complete fantasy on the part of Desai to imagine a character like Rudradatta, who appears to be the guru of an ashram but has a politically active personality. We can say that Desai could develop a character like Rudradatta from Tokaraswami or TeheldasBuva or the ascetic Bhabhutgar; even a famous figure like Shri Arvind can provide enough ideas to flesh out Rudradatta. Second, the presence of Tatya Tope in the novel is also not surprising. As the evidence above suggests, Tope not only passed through Gujarat, but the administration had to announce a prize to catch him in Gujarat.

In addition, Pandya mentions many other names to suggest the involvement of Gujaratis in the uprising. They were people like Maganlal and Nihalchand, members of the trading community; Garabadadas, belonging to the Patidar community; and, many were Bhils and Vadhers, communities known for their aggression.

Some critics have suggested that Gujarat is not an ideal setting to write a work about the uprising of 1857 because it was not involved in the incidents of that period. Vishnu Pandya’s small book, a compendium of facts, however, proves that Desai’s *Bharelo Agni* is not a flight of fancy.