

XII. Achievement

It must be said to the credit of Malgonkar that he did succeed in telling some fine, absorbing stories true to his manifesto, "I do strive deliberately and hard to tell a story well; and I revel in incident, in improbabilities, in unexpected twists".¹ Even his critics who dismiss him with a line or two, at least grudgingly admit Malgonkar's skill in storytelling. With a clear-cut theme, smooth development of the action, monolithic building of the central character surrounded by its planetary aura of minor characters, a pertinent and pregnant use of symbols, myths, superstitions from Indian life and a profuse sprinkling of sex, violence and dramatic episodes, Malgonkar keeps his readers engrossed in his racy and absorbing narration. We are all 'like Scheherazade's husband, in the sense that we want to know what happens next',² and in most of his fictional works Malgonkar keeps us on tenterhooks eager to know what happens next. Prof. P. P. Mehta, complimenting Malgonkar on his skill in storytelling puts him 'above every other novelist.... for sheer power of telling an arresting story'.³ And the Times Literary Supplement reviewer gratifyingly observes that 'a new Malgonkar in a Piccadilly book stall puts the seal on British achievement'.⁴

Circumscribed as he was by his personal and professional world, he brought to his storytelling a definite historical vision. The nineteen forties were an eventful decade and it left a deep

impression upon Malgonkar's sensitive mind. Malgonkar's historical vision is largely shaped by the turn of events during this decade and his fictional works faithfully reflect that aspect impact. The loss of the Public School values, the deterioration in political and social standards, the inefficiency and the incompetence of the new Congress regime and the over-all corruption and jockeying for power initiated by the Congress politicians was a part of the politics played during these days. Malgonkar not only depicts this seamy side of post-Independence Indian politics but also proclaims the grave consequences of this unchecked degeneration. That his veiled prophecies have come true is a triumph of his historical vision.

As a historical novelist Malgonkar emerges as a moralist and a prophet and appears to share Benedetto Croce's attitude to history, who believed that history was a 'manifestation of reality in the present, which contains with itself the impressions from the past and the germs of insight into future'.⁵ As a novelist of the contemporary history Malgonkar clinically analyses the period of history chosen by him. By presenting a truthful account of the seamy side of the Indian political scene before and after the Independence he diagnoses what is ailing the Indian politics; by unfolding the failings of the Indian character, private, public and political, he reveals the cause of the ailment; and by delineating the Satpura Code in various situations, he offers a kind of remedy. His approach to history, as revealed in his fiction, has thus a moral and prophetic note. His observations on the politics

of the forties are applicable not only to the sixties when he was writing his novels, but are relevant to the seventies and eighties as well. Even today they are significant as every sane man today laments the absence of integrity and character in the Indian public and political life. Do we not find hundreds of Lalas, Kanakchands and Jugal Kishores round about us? In fact, Sir Jeffrey's remark 'politics are his business' becomes as prophetic a statement as Shafi Usman's cry 'A million shall die'. If we peep below Malgonkar's veneer of storytelling, this criticism of contemporary Indian life, the kind of criticism that is rarely found in any other Indo-Anglian novelist, becomes evident. A character in H.D. Walker's novel, when it tries to answer the question, "What thoughts will you take away of India?" says to itself:

What thoughts would he take away? Of nepotism and corruption creeping higher? ...Of brilliant plans and hopeless execution? Of love my child and let my neighbour starve? Of caste abolished and going strong? Of Malthus waiting on a bad monsoon? 6

Malgonkar's historical imagination explores and discloses that aspect of the historical truth which has remained hidden so far and which needs to be brought to light. People know only the bright side of the soldier's life--the heroic tales of battles won and lost and personal feats of uncommon courage and sacrifice; the dark aspect of the army life in India with the departure of the British is, perhaps for the first time, depicted by Malgonkar in Distant Drum. There were loud rejoicings over the disappearance of the princely states; almost everybody who was somebody showered compliments on Vallabhbhai Patel for the

miraculously quick solution of the problem; Malgonkar in his The Princes, again for the first time, ⁿ _^ ~~pait~~s the shady aspect of the merger. Almost everybody mourned over the violence committed in the wake of the Partition and satisfied himself with the stock solution that it was inevitable and could not be avoided; but few writers and still ~~very~~ fewer novelists attempted to analyse why Gandhi's non-violence ultimately met its grave in the Partition; Malgonkar is one of those very few, who in his A Bend in The Ganges, accurately and dispassionately analyses the issue from a historian's standpoint, but through a fictional material. In all these novels, Malgonkar's picture of the Indian Independence seems to dwell on the dark side. This is because his approach is clinical --you cannot cure a disease unless you grapple with the diseased part-- and secondly, because he is politically anti-Congress; but it cannot be denied that the fictional treatment of this dark side is borne out by the subsequent history.

Malgonkar grapples with epical themes and the canvas of his novels is often vast and spectacular. In The Princes, he handles a theme that encompassed more than one-third of India's land and population and in dealing with it he has touched almost every aspect of the princely life. In A Bend in the Ganges he handles the theme of violence against the background of the Partition; both the violence and the Partition are issues of immense political significance; they uprooted the life of millions. Through the devastation of life mirrored in the destinies of almost all the characters in the novel imaginatively, Malgonkar has attempted

to write an epic of the Partition. While Azadi and A Train to Pakistan remain novels of individual lives caught in the flux of the violence, A Bend in the Ganges, because of its imaginative realism, rises to a higher stature. In The Devil's Wind and Line of Mars Malgonkar grapples with the Mutiny, an event of epic dimensions. One of the contributions of Malgonkar in dealing with these grandiose themes is that he tries to interpret them in a fresh way endowing them a new historical dimension.

Of the two truths involved in a historical novel, the logical and the literary, Malgonkar is loyal to both. While he scrupulously maintains the historical truth, proudly declaring, 'though some would criticise my style, they don't criticise my historical veracity. I take great pains to be absolutely accurate', he steadfastly remains loyal to the logical truth. Except perhaps, in Combat of Shadows where fate plays a more-than-reality role, in all his fictional works nothing is far from verisimilitude. Even in Combat of Shadows the things that happen rather coincidentally are probable impossibilities and not impossible probabilities. The challenges to Kiran's faith in the Satpura Code, the mutually conflicting characters of Hiroji and Abhay, the Konshet drama of rustic family feud, the small ironies in Nana Saheb's personal life and even Sumati's doomed efforts to maintain the line of Mars have an irrefutable logic of cause and effect relationship. George Eliot destroyed the first draft of Romola because it violated the historical truth and brought out a version that was historically true, but it totally failed as a historical novel.

Scott freely altered historical facts and brought forth his novels that were immensely popular as historical novels. In the one, the logical truth is the casualty, in the other, the historical truth suffers through carelessness. Malgonkar's historical fiction sticks to even small details of the historical truth without in any way affecting the logical sequence. To have maintained both the truths is one of Malgonkar's outstanding achievements accomplished by very few Indo-Anglian novelists.

The problem of an Indian writer in English is discussed by many writers; of all of them Raja Rao's summing up, I think, is the most adequate, appropriately bringing out the dilemma of an Indian writer:

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own....yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up....We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.⁷

Malgonkar is aware of this dilemma; he wonders 'whether there is any Indian writer writing in English who does not at times feel a bit of a fake'.⁸ And yet he confidently tells Dayanand, "I do not feel any self-violence when I choose to write in English";⁹ this ambi-valence in Malgonkar's attitude towards writing in English has evoked conflicting opinions about his use of the English language. One of the TLS reviewers and a few critics disapprove of his old-fashioned, Victorian style 'suited to describing feats on cricket fields and polo grounds, or the pomp of

the tiger hunt'.¹⁰ J.H.Jones strongly criticises Malgonkar's use of English language; quoting a piece of conversation between Abhay and Kanakchand, he violently remarks, "We shall prevent this kind of writing from ever getting into print";¹¹ on the other hand, E.M.Forster congratulates Malgonkar 'on the way you write English and speak it',¹² and the TLS reviewer of The Princes calls it 'the measured, stately prose of old England'.¹³ If we carefully look into these conflicting opinions in their relevant context, the sensible view that emerges is, that on the whole, Malgonkar has succeeded in wielding the language to his purpose, but he has, like all others, a few ugly patches where his style is marred by stereotyped phrases and conventional cliches. I do not agree with Meenakshi Mukherjee in her opinion that Malgonkar has 'generally by-passed the linguistic and stylistic problems inherent in the Indo-Anglian situation';¹⁴ I would rather say that Malgonkar has squarely faced the problem and has come out largely successful because of three reasons: (a) the pedagogic way of teaching English in the days of Malgonkar made him well-versed with the English of Old England, (b) professionally Malgonkar came into a close and exclusive contact with the native speakers of English and (c) his style thus formed was a very convenient vehicle of expression for the historical novel wherein he celebrated the Victorian virtues embodied in the Satpura Code. Malgonkar perhaps would have failed if he had attempted the stream-of-consciousness technique or a novel like Crime and Punishment; for novels of action -- for such are Malgonkar's novels -- his style, I think, is an admirable medium.

Almost all critics of Malgonkar agree, as we have noted earlier that Malgonkar is an excellent storyteller (kindly refer to note 5 of 'Technique'); similarly, almost every critic agrees that Malgonkar displays unbeatable knowledge of history.¹⁵ If we put the two opinions together, they form a certificate proclaiming their admiration for the successful functioning of Malgonkar's historical imagination. Malgonkar seems quite justified in his pride over the fact that his novels are informative as well as entertaining and that they 'are close enough to pass for straight history'.¹⁶

A few observations about Malgonkar's historical books will not be out of place before concluding this study. In his historic books, Malgonkar seems to be primarily interested in characters and in removing misunderstandings--partial, unjust and prejudiced views--about them. His approach to his history is two-pronged: first, his concern, like a true historian, is with truth and nothing but truth; and secondly, his interest in excavating the originality of his historical characters who have been made scapegoats by previous historians and in removing the purposeful misrepresentation of them. To achieve the first aim, he studies scrupulously all records, pursues relentlessly his search for the truth, and once convinced of it, presents it nonchalantly. In his 'Preface' to Chhatrapatis of Kolhapur, Malgonkar describes how the members of the 'History Circle' were keen on arriving at the truth, even in trifles. They checked every single fact, howsoever unimportant and were keen votaries of truth. Malgonkar observes:

Criticism was often sharp and debates heated, and feuds of the past were resuscitated by new participants who often crossed party lines at will.¹⁷

Malgonkar's vigorous championing of the unjustly condemned heroes of history, the second aspect of his history-writing is a part of the historian's quest for truth. Kanhoji Angrey, the men involved in the Gandhi murder and Nana Saheb (I include him here because The Devil's Wind is a purely historical novel of Bulwer-Lytton's type) are all victims of biased and partisan history-writing. In setting their records straight and in restoring to them their historical status, Malgonkar has, I feel, done a laudable contribution to the Maratha history.

There is a renowned American novelist, Walter D. Edmonds who worked with limitations and benefits similar to those of Malgonkar. Robert Gay's observations about Edmonds exactly fit Malgonkar:

His work has some evident limitations. For instance, his outlook is almost exclusively masculine.... But on the other hand few writers can excel him in straight storytelling or in the brilliancy with which he can flash a scene.... He has chosen to cultivate a restricted field intensively and he may have no ambition to extend it.¹⁸

(Continued-----)

Notes

1. M.Malgonkar, "Purdah and Caste-Marks", The TLS, June 4, 1964, p.491.
2. E.M.Forster, Aspects of the Novel, (Penguin, 1963), p.55.
3. P.P.Mehta, Indo-Anglian Fiction: An Assessment (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2nd ed., 1979), p.266.
4. The Times Literary Supplement, Oct.22, 1964, p.966.
5. Benedetto Croce, cit. Historiography (R.K.Majumdar and A.N.Srivastava), (Delhi: Surjeet Book Depot, 1977), pp.42-43.
6. Allen J.Greenberger, The British Image of India, (London: OUP, 1969), p.202.
7. Raja Rao, Kanthapura, (Bombay: Oup, Ind.ed., 1971), Foreword to the book.
8. G.S.Amur, Manohar Malgonkar, (N.Delhi: Arnold Heinemann India, 1973), p.18.
9. James Y.Dayanand, Manohar Malgonkar, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1974), p.22.
10. "Division Without a Conqueror", rev. A Bend in the Ganges, The TLS, Sept.24, 1964, p.873.
11. J.H.Jones, "The Unclear Vision", rev. The Princes, Quest, ~~June 24, 1963~~ Winter, 1965, p.103.
12. ~~Quoted~~ Quoted in Dayanand, p.27.
13. "Ruling Passions", rev. The Princes, The TLS, June 21, 1963, p.457.
14. Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Twice-Born Fiction, (N.Delhi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1971), p.175.

15. Saros Cowasjee, R.S. Singh, P.P. Mehta, G.S. Amur, and Dayanand have all acclaimed Malgonkar's historical veracity.
16. M. Malgonkar, The Directory of British and American Writers, 1971. cit in Amur, p.42.
17. M. Malgonkar, Chhatrapatis of Kolhapur, (Bombay: Allied Publishers Ltd., 1976), p.ix.
18. Robert gay, "Historical Novel: Walter D. Edmonds", The Atlantic Monthly, May 1940, p.658.

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