CHAPTER V

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Albert J. Guerard commenting on Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* writes, “The word entertainment comes to mind in the honourable sense given it by Graham Greene to describe an exciting story for the thoughtful readers, in which the most serious and most intimate human concerns (such as alcoholism and bodily degradation, political loyalty and international conflict, even religious conversion and neurotic self-destructiveness) are put to dramatic and "entertaining" use. This does not mean that Greene does not intend quite sincerely his wry general reflections and religious asides, but simply that they subserve the major aim of original and successful entertainment ... Briefly, one of the appeals of Greene’s fiction derives from the expository play of an interesting and sardonic mind. But the books were not written for the sake of this expository play. Nor were they written to convert readers.”¹ Guerard’s statement on the nature and function

of entertainment helps us to arrive at a balanced assessment of Malgonkar's fiction. In his novels which we have discussed in the foregoing chapters, we find characters, who were involved in all sorts of problems; alcoholism, sex, political conflict, international conflict, religious conversion and neurotic self-destructiveness. In Distant Drum, we come across characters like, Bob Medley and his wife with whom Kiran has to deal in a delicate fashion. We find in The Princes, Abhayraj has to deal with his father, who is an extravagant alcoholic and his mother who sought religious conversion for the sake of marrying Abdulla Jan. We notice neurotic self-destructiveness in Henry Winton in Combat of Shadows. We find Major Gilchrist in Bandicoot Run and Rajguru in The Garland Keepers, try to exploit a situation, created by an international conflict. Moreover, we have characters like Abhayraj in The Princes, Debi-Deyal in A Bend in the Ganges, Netra Agarwal in The Garland Keepers, who are specialists in "Judo," "that ancient art of Samurai, which was said to be so much superior to wrestling, India and the boxing of the West."\(^2\) Not only are they well

\(^2\)Manohar Malgonkar, A Bend in the Ganges (Orient Paperbacks, 1964), p. 68.
Informed of the theory, but occasionally they put the theory into practice.

When Abdulla Jan and his friends talk insolently about his mother, Abhayraj gives them a horrible kick. Debi-Dayal in the Andamans, gives a scrotum-kick to Sal Bahadur, a gurkha sentry. Hetra Agarwal does it better than Debi-Dayal when she smashes the shoulder of Ambika Das in The Garland Keepers. These incidents are not by themselves very significant. But in their context, they are illuminating. Because they suggest a certain toughness of mind and an inclination to resist what is blatantly vicious.

It is in the context of the foregoing observations that Combat of Shadows is a genre that Malgonkar has tried to plant on the soil of Indian Fiction in English. What is called 'entertainment' by Greene is called 'thriller' in America. We find that Malgonkar makes generous use of this narrative mode, and Bandicoot Run and The Garland Keepers may be discussed as 'Thrillers.' Jerry Palmer in his illuminating book, Thrillers has written that, "cynically
formulated, the morality of the Thriller, is the morality of the play-ground. .... He started it ... "He started it."

Palmer thinks that hero and conspiracy constitute the most fundamental layer of the thriller. The narrative evolves in such a way that the hero resists, exposes, and invariably shatters the conspiracy which aims at surverting and disrupting the normal order. But one of the sophistications of the thriller consists in the sudden change that takes place in the commitment of the hero. We have this sort of thing in Greene's *A Gun for Sale*. We have, for example, in Malgonkar's *The Garland Keepers*, Visram Lal and Chopra, who are a part of the corrupt political system that Rajguru exploits for his own ends, change their minds, unravel the conspiracy and bring the culprit to book.

A general observation that can be made on Malgonkar's fiction is that it demonstrates his craftsman like approach, especially, to plot construction. In the discussion of the individual novels, we have seen how that they are made exciting by a deft use of 'Peripetia'. While his fictional rhetoric is competent and sometimes masterly, his verbal resourcefulness is also equally commendable.
In *A Sort of Life* Graham Greene says, "My long studies in Percy Lubbock’s *Craft of Fiction* has taught me the importance of the ‘point of view’ but not how to convey physical excitement ... physical excitement is simple; excitement is a situation, a single event. It must not be wrapped up in thoughts, similes, metaphors. A simile is a form of reflection, but excitement is of the moment, where there is no time to reflect. Action can only be expressed by a subject, a verb, and an object, perhaps a rhythm - little else. Even an adjective sows the pace or tranquilises the nerve." 3

In an earlier chapter, we have noted how Malgonkar was indebted to the 'Entertainers in fiction' like Dickens, Stevenson, Conrad and Greene. The preceding citation from Greene supplies the clue to the action oriented language we find in Malgonkar. In order to illustrate the point, let us consider the following passages.

It must have taken a fraction of a second to register. Bert was looking away from him; he pressed his shoulder hard against the door.

handle and felt it yield and at the same time brought up his knees and feet and shoved himself away, blindly. He saw Bart's knife flash in the darkness and rip out a long tear in the plastic cover of the seat. But the door had jerked open and he was falling out, still thrashing wildly, bracing himself for the jar, and yelling:

"Don't open, Kate! They're killers! Ring Police! Pol ..."

Just as he turned a corner, he heard a piercing scream and the sound of running footsteps, and from a narrow outlet between two houses, a woman ran out screaming. The top half of her body was bare and she was clutching with both hands the loose folds of her falling sari. Closely following her were two men, both yelling at her to stop. The woman tumbled and fell down as a part of her sari came undone and tripped her up. The next moment, one of her pursuers had caught up with her. With one tug, he wrenched off the chain she wore round her neck and the other man caught her by the hand and pulled her to her feet. "You ..." he yelled. "Leave that woman alone," Kiran shouted as he ran up to them.

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The first citation is from Malgonkar's late novel, *Open Season*. The second one is from *Distant Drum*, Malgonkar's first novel. *Open Season*, as the author himself says in his note, "was not written as a novel. It was written as a story for a film that was never made. It deals with the experiences of a young Indian scholar, Jaikumar who goes to Princeton for higher studies. Although he leaves India not to mortgage his culture and conviction for affluent American way of life, he soon becomes a part of the American affluence. He develops a friendly relationship with a girl called, Kate. On a few occasions Kate does baby-sitting to help a rich family. On one of his visits to Kate, Jaikumar Americanised as Jake, gives lift to two kidnappers who plan to loot the house in which Kate does baby-sitting. If we analyse the passage, in terms of its context, we can see how Greene's method of bringing physical excitement into the novel is neatly adopted by Malgonkar. The words "taken," "looting," "pressed," "yield," "shoved," "saw," "rift," "jerk" energise the passage, which is followed by a sharp warning to Kate not to open the doors. Moreover, the passage conveys without
detaining the reader's attention for a long time, a sense of heroic effort by an unheroic character. Whether the kidnapping episode and the protagonist's confrontation with the kidnappers have any significant connection with the main theme of the novel is beside the point. The point is, the verbal resourcefulness and control of the author in evoking and communicating the feel of excitement largely in chaste monosyllabic anglo-saxon vocabulary.

The second passage under discussion has the same verbal strategy and suggestivity. The protagonist of Distant Drum witnesses the pursuit of a woman by two religious fanatics in the riot torn Delhi. The last sentence with its "tug," "revenge," "fought," "pulled" and "yelled" achieves a nightmarish quality, but the commanding voice of Kiran instantaneously dissolves the night-mare. Examples of this sort can be multiplied. And in the discussion of the individual novels, we have given special importance to this point.

In fine, it may be said that among the contemporary Indian novelists only Malgonkar has achieved a high degree of sophistication in writing Entertainment/thriller. As we have been saying, although that the structural elements
and the verbal effects of this genre are noticeable in Malgonkar's fiction from the start, it is with the publication of *Combat of Shadows* that the characteristic features of this genre are concretely there in his fiction. *Combat of Shadows*, *Bandicoot Run* and *The Garland Keepers* are good examples of this genre. This doesn’t mean that they are devoid of seriousness. Even his most ambitious novel, *A Bend in the Ganges*, may be safely viewed from the narrative perspective of an entertainment. This clearly demonstrates that Indian novelists in English are highly evolved craftsmen of fiction and are capable of planting and nurturing a popular western narrative mode on the Indian fictional soil. Malgonkar’s achievement seems to belie the prophecy of Eliot that "the contemporary thriller is in danger of becoming 'stereotype.'"  

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