CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
Indian Fiction in English, over the years, has acquired prestige and popularity because of its richness, complexity and variety. We usually associate the names of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya with the triumph of Indian novel in English. These novelists have received more than adequate critical response. There are not many full-length critical commentaries on novelists like Malgonkar and Arun Joshi. The composite image of India with all its socio-cultural variety and diversity is adequately and fairly represented in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand and other novelists. Arun Joshi appears to be following the example set by them. Malgonkar seems to deviate from the established path and writes about some of the themes, which they have not touched, for example, the common heritage of the Indian and the Pakistani military establishment, the fate and fortune of the Indian Princely States and historical figures like Nana Sahab. Of course, one has to be careful in classifying novelists on the basis of the contents of the novels. Sometimes themes and forms overlap and create problems of interpretation and assessment for the reader.
For example, partition of India and its diabolical consequences are dramatised by Malgonkar, Kushwant Singh and Chaman Mahal. Malik Raj Anand and Malgonkar have narrated the fortunes of the Indian Princes. Arun Joshi and Malgonkar have brought the theme of Indian students abroad into the fiction. But the narrative method and the stylistic mode differ and each novelist has his own methodological perspective to dramatise and evaluate a segment of the composite image of India.

Keeping firmly in view the general observations made in the preceding lines, an attempt has been made in the following pages to discuss Malgonkar's fiction, not in terms of themes or subject matter, but in terms of his narrative mode and fictional rhetoric. This discussion proceeds by applying some of the observations Malgonkar made on his narrative strategy to analyse the novels. Malgonkar once said:

"I do strive deliberately and hard, to tell a story well; and I revel in incident, in improbabilities, in unexpected twists. I feel a special allegiance to the particular subcaste"
among those whose caste-mark I have affected, the entertainers, the tellers of stories. Novels that do not conform to this basic pattern, however well-written they may be, are to me like unending cheese straws, they may tickle the taste buds, but they cannot constitute a square meal — at least not to one who is used to curries and chutneys.¹

What is significant in the above citation is that Malgonkar aligns himself with story tellers and entertainers. But curiously enough, there are a number of celebrated names in the history of English fiction to whom the word entertainer was applied. Starting from Dickens the list includes Chesterton, Conrad and Greene. It is here one thinks of critical monographs like Peter Wolfe's, Graham Greene: the Entertainer. Greene called some of his novels entertainments. For example, Brighten Rock carried the label "entertainment" when it was first published. In America this kind of fiction goes by name thriller. Peter Wolfe approving of G.S.Frazer's suggestion, argues that Greene's entertainments have something

in common with John Buchan's *The Thirty-nine Steps*. He thinks that "what shortens thematic distances and cuts dramatic corners for Greene is melodrama." Peter Wolfe's observation on Greene, helps us in formulating a theoretical framework within which Malgonkar's achievement as an entertainer can be discussed and assessed.

As has already been noted, Malgonkar strives deliberately and hard to tell us a story well. He revels in incident, improbabilities and in unexpected twists. In most of his novels, we notice a well told story, exciting incident, improbabilities and unexpected twists. This sort of narration makes skilful use of melodrama and Peripetia. As Frank Kermode says, "The story that proceeded very simply to its obviously predestined end would be nearer myth than novel or drama. Peripetia, which has been called the equivalent in narrative, of irony in rhetoric, is present in every story of the least structural sophistication." 

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Kermode goes on to say, "The more daring the peripetia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naive expectations, is finding something out for us, something real. When we read Malgonkar's novels, we feel that apart from melodrama, the one stock device he uses is peripetia. This is perhaps what Malgonkar might have meant, when he says, that he likes unexpected twists. Peripetia in Malgonkar often operates in the form of a sudden complication in the plot. For example, Kiran's transfer in Distant Drum from Army Headquarters in Delhi to Raniwada. This is not in generated, as he suspects, by his opponents in the Army Headquarters. It is the result of Bina's father, Mr. Sonal's anxiety to separate the lovers. In Combat of Shadows, the reappearance of the rogue elephant in the forest not only transforms the

4Ibid. p. 18.
destiny of characters, but pushes the plot to an unexpected end. The skilful manipulation of incident that leads to peripetia in the other novels is explained at appropriate places in the following pages.

Malgonkar's forte as an entertainer is his skill in evolving the plot of his novel. Usually the incidents converge on the fortunes of a single character. In order to deepen the significance of that character in action, a less prominent character is placed by his or her side. Kiran and Abdul Jamal in Distant Drum, Abhayraj and Kanakchand in The Princess, Henry Winton and Eddie Trevor in Combat of Shadows, Gian and Debi-Dyal in A Bend in the Ganges, Jaikumar and Abe in Open Season constitute the character core in the plots of these novels. When he adopts the thriller mode in Bandicoot Run and The Garland Keepers, we find that all the incidents converge on a single character. Apart from a well-knit plot and a skilful use of peripetia within the plot, we notice Malgonkar's articulation of the thematic complex of his novels is racy and at the same time very controlled. Sometimes images appear to shock the reader so as to drag
him slowly into the spirit of the story. We have illustrated this point at the appropriate places in the following discussion. But at this point, it seems to be necessary to discuss a novel, the thematic content of which is largely drawn from the history of the Sepoy Mutiny or The First war of Indian Independence. The Devil's Wind dramatizes the life of Nana Sahib, a controversial personality in the country's history. The Devil's Wind is told in the first person and may be termed as the confession of Nana Sahib. In author's note Malgonkar says, "This ambiguous man and his fate have always fascinated me. I discovered that the stories of Nana and the revolt have never been told from the Indian point of view. This, then, is Nana's story as I believe he might have written it himself. It is fiction; but it takes no liberties with verifiable facts or with probabilities." The preceding citation makes two points; one is that Nana's story which is a part of history, is conceived as fiction. The other is that the author is fascinated
by the story which he would like to tell. But what is to be noted is that the first person narration is the least privileged mode of narrating a story. Sometimes in this mode of narration, there is a possibility of the novelist losing the necessary distance that would help him to be objective and unprejudiced in evaluating his theme. But there are a few notable exceptions. For example, Thackeray makes Henry Esmond tell his own story and could achieve the transition from motherly love to romantic love in the character of Esmond unobtrusively.

In the Devil's Wind, Malgonkar seems to succeed in achieving objectivity so as to make his evaluation of his subject fair and free. In all his novels Malgonkar evokes the atmosphere and milieu of his tale so well as to integrate it with character and action. The point may be illustrated by analysing a few significant passages from the novel under consideration. Let us, for example, consider the following passage.

This unfortunate girl was brought all the way from her home-land to be married. Her name was
Kashi and she was, they said, only ten years old. I first saw her during the marriage ceremony, as the curtain held between us was lowered and the priests were chanting, "Beware, the golden moment arrives," which is the last verse in our wedding service.

A sickly, black-haired creature with large, petrified eyes and skin mottled as though feathers had been plucked from it, stared back at me. She reminded me of a crow brought to a snake house for a python's meal. I quickly shut my eyes and concentrated my thoughts on Amijen, who must be, I knew, already in my hand, waiting.\(^5\)

Mena is aware that for the girl, marriage with him is not a joyous occasion. That he himself is not very keen about the marriage, is conveyed by, "she was, they said, ten years old." Moreover, the practice of performing child marriages and the fate of the arranged marriages is unabtrusively suggested by, "I first saw her during the marriage ceremony." The bride is referred to

as creature. Her eyes are petrified and she appears as a hen whose feathers had been plucked from it. But what is more significant is the image of crow brought to a snake-house for a python's meal. This suggests, not that the narrator is, a python, but the circumstances in which he is placed, is like a forest which is concretely evoked in *Combat of Shadows*. In that novel pythons supply the organizing motif of the novel. Here, it evokes the corrupt atmosphere of concubines and unethical sexual practices in politics. He confronts the real crisis of his life after the death of his adopted father. But even before that incident when the state of Oudh was annexed to the British Empire by Lord Dalhousie, Nana feels,

Every Hindu believes that an eclipse happens when the demons, Rahu and Ketu, swallow the moon or the sun, and that they regurgitate their prey only when they are propitiated by mass prayers and fasts. No fire is lit in the house nor food eaten, and men and women crowd the holy places to beseech the demons to disgorge their prey. But the Dalhousies of the company were not like our propitiable moon
eaters; they never gave up what they had swallowed prayers, fasting, mourning meant nothing to them.  

The above passage brings to light the Hindu beliefs and practices and the callous indifference of the British to the sacred oath parents and children take ritualistically when they are adopted by one another.  

Having realised at the age of thirty two that he is a pensioner, may be a euphemism for a pauper, Nana thinks of extricating himself from the legal muddle and personal uncertainty he inherits from his adopted father. In this protracted struggle, he loses his faith but not his nerve. The incidents in Kanpur and the great upheaval in which he was plunged have an educative value for Nana. Although he was installed as the Peeshwa, he doesn’t fail to recognise the risk involved. Facing defeat, pursuit and public hanging, he crosses the border and joins others in Nepal. Even an official report of

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his death doesn't satisfy the British. But as a brahmin he disowns his responsibility for the Satichura massacre and towards the end feels, "that the profound silence of the Ganges are somehow closer to me than my surroundings."\(^7\)

The above analysis of the Devil's Wind makes the point that whether Malgonkar writes about the Indian army or the Indian History or the Partition of India, he does it with meticulous craftsmanship that focuses the attention on the fusion of character and milieu. But one may wonder whether violence, arson, rape and murder either in the historical context or in the fictional context conform to the canons of realism. But as Nicolas Freeling rightly observes, "Murder, and any other crime is not a part of the entertainment but an integral part of the life. We are all murderers, we are all spies, we are all criminals and to choose a crime as a main spring of action is only to find one of the simplest ways of focussing eyes on our life and world."\(^8\) As an entertainer, 


Malgonkar seems to feel that excitement cannot be described, but only communicated. And his creative effort is largely oriented towards making sense of what is exciting.