CHAPTER - IV

THE THRILLER MODE
CHAPTER - IV

THE THRILLER MODE

Malgonkar's Fiction seems to take quite a new turn with the publication of Bandicoot Run (1962). His latest novel The Garland Keepers is a continuation of the fictional rhetoric he has been developing since the publication of Combat of Shadows. A close scrutiny of Bandicoot Run and The Garland Keepers would confirm the thesis that was elaborately discussed in the earlier chapters, Malgonkar as an Entertainer. Not only the narrative method but his style also undergoes a significant change in the novels under consideration. Let us, for example, consider the following passages:

"Power does not come out of the barrel of a gun," Uncle Shan used to tell his few admirers. "In democracies it flows from your 'knowledge of your rivals' secrets."

This was a life size oil painting of the Goddess Shakti, done by the Polish artist, Janos Rakosi. One of the foremost of the Picasso school of painters, Rakosi had painted

---

the Goddess in some manifestation that no Hindu devotee would have recognised. There was something in her of an angel as well as of a witch, but more than anything else, she was a woman who had worked herself into a mood of flaming anger and was poised to destroy the world.2

A part of the mystique of having been a soldier is that, whenever you run into other old soldiers, you can't wait to exchange gossip about your erstwhile comrades.3

The first two citations are from The Garland Keepers. The first one almost reads like an epigrammatic wisdom on the politics of Democracy. The second one is an ironic comment on what Swamiji's achieve in their eagerness to educate their admirers in the tenets of the Hindu religion. What is more curious about the second passage is the polish painter's perversity in making the Goddess Shakti look like a witch.

Both the passages suggest the way Malgonkar's style creates the character and the milieu and his linguistic


economy. The third citation is from *The Bandicoot Run*. The passage demonstrates the suggestivity and the controlled tone we notice in Malgonkar's style. Brian Gilchrist who could not migrate to the west after the Second War stays in India and leads a hand-to-mouth existence by involving himself in smuggling military secrets from India to Pakistan. The passage under review, and especially the word mistique, deftly convey the familiarity he has in the top military circles. Apart from being very interesting and entertaining *Bandicoot Run* and *The Garland Keepers* are tremendous and thought-provoking images of the contemporary politico-military climate in Asia. For the sake of exploratory convenience, we shall analyse the *Garland Keepers* and then explore its rhetorical affinity with *Bandicoot Run*.

In the sort of Fiction that Malgonkar writes, Plot assumes a crucial role. The plot of *The Garland Keepers* is constructed by placing Swami Rajguru at the centre of it. In the Indian novel in English, we come across a number of characters who more or less resemble Malgonkar's Swamiji. For example, we come across a Swamiji in Shabani Bhattacharya's
novel, *A Dream in Havai*. In spite of his weakness for the company of good looking women, Bhattacharya's Swamiji doesn't deviate from the normal Hindu view of a Swamiji. On the other hand in Jhabwala's novels and stories we come across Swamijis, who are more mundane and modern than their western disciples. Malgonkar's Rajguru seems to go a step further by involving himself in an organised loot of the country's resources.

He does this by following the methods of J. Edgar Hoover, the chief of American Secret Service. Udam Rao Mane, a simple minded peasant politician was an ardent devotee of Swami Rajguru. When he was the Cabinet Minister, he was very meticulous in organising a Microfilm library of the secret dossiers of the men and the women prominent in the nation's life. Rajguru persuaded him to transfer that library to his ashram. It was operated by Swami's trusted agents Pashupat and Kaul, but they were allowed to do the work in the presence of the Swami or Ekanthi Ma.

The possession of this sordid information gave Swami his mysterious power and influence over the Great Leader who presided over the destiny of the country. There was a bank fraud which involved one Dorabji, an ex-army captain. The
case was investigated by Om Prakash Agarwal who was responsible for the conviction of Dorabji. Although Dorabji was granted bail, he preferred to remain in Tihar Jail to undergo a five-year prison term. Om Prakash, who was promoted to the rank of a Deputy Superintendent as a special recognition for his efficient handling of the Dorabji Bank fraud case, didn't cease to take further interest in the case. He knew it well that Dorabji was only a stooge and behind the entire case there were very important and powerful people of the capital. He had information that the entire money was sent to Mauritius through the good offices of Ekanti Ma, the chief disciple of the Swami. Before initiating any serious action against Ekanti Ma, Om Prakash wanted to have an expert's advice on the matter. So he went to Visram Lal who was his friend and a Superintendent in the Special Branch.

Visram Lal did not want to involve himself in cases associated with the Police. But before Om Prakash had left the place he wrote a note in which he informed Visram Lal that he could find all the information about Dorbji's case in his case Diary and the diary was with his sister, Netra.
Agarwal. It so happened that Om Prakash met with an accident and was pronounced 'Dead' by the Delhi Police Authority. In the meanwhile Visram Lal was summoned to the Office of Pashupot and Kaul for some information about Om Prakash. These two men were supposed to be the mouth-pieces of the Great Leader and all orders emanating from the Great Leader were passed through them over the telephone. They ask him whether Om Prakash was an alcoholic for which he gave a negative reply. Realising that Matra Agarwal might be in trouble, because she was Om Prakash's sister and was in possession of the case diary, Visram wanted to warn her. But before he could do this, her flat was raided by two unidentified men and she was assaulted. In order to mislead the criminals who may raid his own flat, Visram Lal kept in his room whisky bottles, tapes and some foreign currency. As he expected, the raid took place and the matter was reported to his superior Mr Chopra. But Mr Chopra had some sympathy and confidence in his colleague. Realising this, Rajguru made the authorities know that Chopra's sister was married to an American, who was employed in the American Secret service. Acting hastily on this information, Chopra was relieved of his duties as the chief of the secret
service and in his place appointed a junior man, Surbinder Singh, who was a stooge of Rajguru.

The success of any story, even that of a detective story depends on 'Peripetia' that the narrator can introduce into the story. It may be a sudden reversal not in the fortunes of a character but in the onward movement of the action itself. In Garland Keepers this Peripetia consists in the way Viram Lal, Chopra and Avinash Batra join hands to unravel the mystery that lies behind the activities of the Swami. With the information supplied by Om Prakash's trusted servant who went to Kashmir to gather it, they succeed in exposing the identity of the Swami.

It is here that the prologue assumes immense significance. The Swami is identified as Naik Fida Ali who deserted a Pakistani regiment in Kashmir in 1948, and joined a Buddhist monastery called the Math of the Thirteen Order at Deoban. The three officers could achieve this because they had the staunch support and help of the Pakistani Army officials, especially Jamal Jin who was the captain of the group to which Naik Fida Ali (Swami) belonged.
The above plot summary of *The Garland Keepers* obviously suggests that it is a story of a notorious cheat who used his resources and talents to subvert and undermine the law and order system of the country. His bluff was called by the determined action and strategy of officers who were a part of the system to which Swami Ji himself belonged. The narrator while telling the story of *The Garland Keepers* makes us see also the deeper irony involved in a tight political situation. The epigraphs that preface the novel seem to suggest this. The first epigraph from "the Etiquette of flowers," tells us that

the principle deity in the temple may be garlanded by the head-priest, or his deputy, a monarch only by those in the first circle of nobility. When the garlands are removed, they are passed on to the most favoured among the courtiers, whose privilege it is to keep them.

In terms of the preceding citation, we may say that the entire novel is a continuous process of garlanding the deity and keeping in safe custody the garlands removed. We do not come across the Great Leader nor do we hear
anything from him, but it is the courtiers whom we come across. Most of the courtiers are either under the spell of Swamiji or work hand-in-glove with him to achieve their despicable ends. For example let us examine the following passage:

The earpiece crackled. It was Ambika Das. Again. "Kakji will speak to you in a minute. Meanwhile, he wants to know if it is girl trouble."

Rajguru had never permitted any of Kakji's cronies to become familiar with him, and flumed at the impertinence. "Yes, it is," he countered. "I went and stood in front of the women's hostel and serenaded the girls with obscenities.

He waited for a reaction but did not get any. God, that must have stung, he realized with satisfaction, as he listened to the background sounds. Moans interspersed with giggles, and then a dog barking with excitement. He gave a start as Kakji's voice suddenly rasped in his ear: "what do you want, you lecherous bugger? Don't tell me you have managed to put yet another secretary in the family way?"

This time there was no question of a cutting retort. Rajguru scowled, but made appropriate sounds in response to the effecolour badinage,
telling himself that a young man with arrested mental development who had come into money and power could not be expected to conform to civilized norms of behaviour. In the end it was Kakji who said impatiently: "Ok, Ok; what do you want?"

"It is about the Dorabji case. There are complications. Some busybodies have complete knowledge of what is happening. They have been building up evidence — powerful men who are determined to make trouble."

The revelation had a cooling effect. Kakji uttered a soft curse and said: "I'll come and see you at the ashram. No, no; I cannot even tell you the approximate time. You wait there."

The above citation is long but very revealing. The name Kakji is very suggestive. His full name is Kalas-kak, who is, it is taken for granted likely to succeed the Great Leader. Whenever he visits Rajguru's Ashram, the Guru entertains him with a bottle of Royal Salute Whisky. The passage makes it obvious the sort of Rajas and Gurus that feed on the political system like

maggots. "Noans," "giggles," "lecherous bugger,"
"scowled," "complications," "busy-bodies," demonstrate
the nature of the system in which the whole nation is
held in ransom. This is reinforced by the second epigraph
which says:

The strongest chains binding the prisoners
were their universal submission and total
surrender to their situation as slaves. 5

Although the preceding citation is an appropriate
comment on the novel's background it seems to suggest the
final "Peripeties" and the 'irony' of the novel. The poli-
tical systems on which Rajgurus thrive are not local but
ubiquitous. Dropped in Pakistani territory by a parachute
and taken into custody by General Jamal Din, Rajguru says:

Look, the very last thing I told my ... my
life's devoted companion, a lady of extraordinary
charm and resourcefulness, was that she was to
get a message to Field Marshall Inayat before
nine this morning. She has friends in the
Chinese embassy in New Delhi. She must have
passed on the message within the hour. After

5 The Garland Keepers, p. v.
that, for Peking to send it to your Chief ...
I believe there is a hot line.6

Although the Pakistani General takes it as Rajguru's usual bluff we find that the ruler of Pakistan has made up his mind to receive Rajguru and give him a place in the political system which he controls. Without making any specific personal or political reference, Malgonkar succeeds in dramatizing the contemporary socio-political situation and its cultural moorings by using a conventional literary form.

The foregoing analysis of *The Garland Keepers* makes a few points. Malgonkar as an entertainer, constructs his plots in such a way as to make the entire narrative racy, powerful and highly suggestive. Usually he keeps a character at the centre of the plot. We may say that the Plot's action generates from that central character. This may be illustrated by analysing his penultimate novel *Bandicoot Run*, which is more interesting than *The Garland Keepers*, because Bandicoot Run illustrates in a sophisti-

---

cated manner the fictional strategies of Malgonkar.

Moreover, instead of being ironic like *Garland Keepers* it has a human touch. The narrative centre in *Bandipur Run* is Major Gilchrist, a former British Army Officer who could not migrate to England after the Second War.

Gilchrist marries an Anglo-Indian lady and for that reason was treated with muted contempt by his colleagues in the army. He seems to have some sympathy for the country in which he sought his livelihood. For example, he tells his fellow army officers,

> The name is Gandhi, not Gandi. You'd better learn to pronounce it correctly, because it will be remembered long after the Statesman is forgotten, or, for that matter, Lord Linlithgow and Neville Chamberlain.\(^7\)

From the preceding citation it is obvious that his quick retorts and outspoken attitude are not liked by his fellow-army officers. He seems to have met E.M. Forster when he visited India in 1946. He was bold enough to ask him

Mr Forster, you're often quoted as saying that, if you were ever called upon to make the choice between betraying your friend or your country, you hoped you would have the courage not to betray your friend. Did you really mean it? (Emphasis added)

Of course, Forster does not give any affirmative answer to the question raised by Gilchrist. But from the point of view of Gilchrist's career as an officer, and as a man, the question is very significant, and his activity as a retired officer provides a sort of an answer.

Gilchrist's friends have come to occupy very prominent positions in the Indian and the Pakistani army circles. Major General Khadar Hussain, the Director of ISI of Pakistan is one of the officers Gilchrist has known since his Second War days. He has also known General Behl since the Second War when Gilchrist was in-charge of the transfer of various officers from one front to the other. He helped Khadar Hussain and did not help Behl.

---

He helped Khadar Hussain because Khadar Hussain was in love with Gloria, Gilchrist wife's sister. He did not help Bahl because he believed that a soldier ought to fight. Because of his indiscreet acts Gilchrist was court-marshalled and his promotion to the higher cadre was stopped. He was shrewd enough to get hold of the file which contained proceedings against him and the evidence given by Khadar Hussain and General Bahl for and against him. As a rootless man facing poverty and age, Gilchrist with his wife resides in Belgaum which is near to Goa. In order to survive he devises the system, Bandicoot Run. It is as a matter of fact, a way of getting hush money by blackmailing the top army officials in the Indian sub-continent. Gilchrist does not have any qualms in earning his livelihood in this fashion. For one thing India and Pakistan have been in a state of conflict ever since their inception.

So it is not an unscrupulous act if he squeezes some money by creating unfounded suspicion of each other. Moreover, as he says, to favour Pakistan against India is one thing; to give one or both the countries into the
hands of the world power to be used as pawns in the
gigantic and unsocializing struggle of theory over theory
was another. This is not the attitude of an unscrupulous
blackmailer. It is this political policy that made Gilchrist
turn down a fortune from an American agent, Jack Pasotti for
giving a file about the Indian army. Ironically enough, the file the American agent wanted contains a record of
the court marshall proceedings against Gilchrist.

The politics within the Indian army gives Gilchrist
a chance to organise what he calls Bandicoot Run. As he
explains it,

it really was a tunnel running all the way
from the innermost sanctums of the Indian Army's
headquarters at New Delhi, to the office of the
Director of Interservices Intelligence in
Rawalpindi, Pakistan.9

There is a keen competition and ruthless rivalry
between General Garud and General Behl for the top position
in the army.

Using his great influence in the political and military circles, Behl makes a hectic attempt to damn Garud by fabricating a charge that he passed on military secrets to Pakistan. The plot of Bandicoot Run consists of the effort of two men Naskar and Pulla Reddy in discovering the "Bandicoot Run," and busting it. The counter operation against the Bandicoot Run succeeds in exposing General Behl and establishing the loyalty and integrity of his rival. The novel is divided into two parts - part one dramatizes the efforts of General Garud's friends to vindicate his honour. Part two, Gilchrist's story-almost reads like a confession. Strictly speaking part two is more significant than Part one both thematically and structurally. Gilchrist tells his own story and in the process analyses his own post-war career. In a very revealing passage he tells Jack Pasotti,

India is my country more than Britain ever was. And that India includes Pakistan. And that's not the whole story either. For the Englishmen of my generation who were in the Indian army, there was an additional bond: the army itself. It was our playground, school, the place where we grew to manhood, even our
home, the place where our family was and where most of us had deep roots. I don't know what many of these people would do if called upon to make a choice between betraying the Indian army for the sake of England. Whatever it is, it won't be an easy choice. For me, luckily, I don't have to make that choice.  

The passage under review may be taken as an answer to the question Gilchrist posed to E.M. Forster when he met him. It suggests the scheme of values that governed life and career of Gilchrist. No doubt his activity in India cannot be justified on conventional laws but it can be defended from the point of view of the norms of existence. The following passage simply demonstrates the human factor involved in the predicament of Gilchrist:

That one thought sustained me; that I had an hour's clear start. It was going to be hard on poor Nancy, but that couldn't be helped. She would be the one who would have to wind up things and face a barrage of questions from the Police. And then I suddenly remembered that there was no money in the house, and I began to

think of the things Nancy could sell to raise some ready cash. 11

A comparative assessment of the novels discussed in the foregoing pages suggests that Malgonkar’s art as an Entertainer depends on his craft of fiction. A complex theme requires an intelligent means of articulation. In the Garland Keepers the theme appears to be the nature and mode of human dissembling and Rajguru is a fine illustration of its character and its consequences. In Bandicoot Run the theme is the dynamics of survival and Major Gilchrist is a convincing illustration of the twists and quirks that survival involves. Using a conventional form Malgonkar succeeds in compressing experience, wit and insight in the novels under review.

---