

## CHAPTER-IV

### Manohar Malgonkar's Distant Drum

Though Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan are rightly called the 'Big Three' in Indo-English literature, Manohar Malgonkar's reputation as a novelist, historian and short story-teller cannot be ignored. With the publication of his first novel Distant Drum (1960), Malgonkar succeeded in acquiring the status of one of the leading writers in the realm of Indian Writing in English.

Malgonkar has, so far, published ten novels, three collections of short stories, five plays and many other articles on divergent subjects. In just five years he published his first four novels, viz., Distant Drum (1960), Combat of Shadows (1962), The Princes (1963), and A Bend in the Ganges (1964).

From his boyhood days Malgonkar had a great interest in hunting. He joined the Indian Army as a soldier during the Second World War and rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Therefore, he could get a first-hand experience of army life. It is but natural that this experience should prove the major source of inspiration for the first novel, Distant Drum. Similarly, Mulk Raj Anand could write on the cantonment life as his father was in the army. Raja Rao reflected his philosophical ideas in The Serpent and the Rope because he was deeply influenced by his guru Sri. Atmanand. The point is that personal experiences of the author and the surroundings in which he lives creep in his writing.

Now, when we think of the novel form, Malgonkar's ideas are completely different from those of Raja Rao. For Raja Rao, "the Indian novel can only be epic in form and metaphysical in nature".<sup>1</sup> But Malgonkar considers that plot, story and well-knit form are essential elements of a novel. Mulk Raj Anand also rejects Raja Rao's idea of the novel form. He argues that "the writer should not insert his doctrinaire opinions in the novel, which as an art form has its own distinct pattern based on human relations."<sup>2</sup>

Malgonkar is influenced by the American novelist John P. Marquand. Malgonkar himself has admitted Marquand's impact on the craft, form and style of his fiction. He says, "P. Marquand had a great influence on me because I liked his literary style, his thought processes".<sup>3</sup> He also admires writers like E.M. Forster, Truman Capote, Steinbeck for their well constructed and dramatic novels.

Like E.M. Forster and Henry James, Malgonkar also believes that 'story' is an essential part of a novel. E.M. Forster holds the view albeit regretfully that of all the aspects of the novel, telling a story is the major one. To put it in the words of Forster, "Yes - oh dear yes - the novel tells a story".<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Henry James points out that "the most important point of all is the story that 'the story is everything'".<sup>5</sup> Malgonkar himself speaks about his art of story-telling, "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 this particular sub-caste among those whose castmark I have affected, the entertainers, the tellers of stories".<sup>6</sup>

In order to study the autobiographical novel, one must know about the biographical information of the author and find out how much of it is incorporated in fiction and to what extent facts are transmuted into fiction. To the present date, there is no official biography of Malgonkar available. In the case of Mulk Raj Anand, we have his straightforward autobiography Pilpali Sahab that is why we could be able to study his autobiographical novel Seven Summers. However, in the case of Malgonkar no primary source is available as far as his personal life is concerned. In this regard B.G. Joshi is right when he says that:

*The private life of a man is generally known to others through his biographies, autobiography, memoirs, private correspondence and the information gleaned from him, his friends, relatives and associates. In case of Malgonkar there is no biography nor is there any evidence of Malgonkar's having maintained any diary or private literary correspondence, nor has he, so far published any autobiography.*<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, as far as Distant Drum is concerned, we have to rely upon the critical comments on Malgonkar's work by noted critics like G.S. Amur, Y. James Dayananda and Rajgopalchari etc.

Distant Drum is an autobiographical novel by Malgonkar.

Kiran Garud, the protagonist of Distant Drum is a Satpura officer who tries to live up to the regimental code of conduct. It is an autobiographical novel in the sense that the story this novel deals with is based on Malgonkar's own experiences as an army officer in the Indian Army. Kiran is a fictional figure, a creature of imagination. He is created in the image of the author himself. The whole story revolves around Kiran Garud as he is the central figure in the novel.

Before we begin our study of Distant Drum, it is to be noted that though Malgonkar was in the army, he had no first-hand knowledge of the War, as he had not actively participated in the war. He was in 'a strategic place, the Intelligence Corps', which gave him the chance to come into direct contact with the army officer and the soldiers who fought on the Burma front. Malgonkar himself makes it clear:

*The war incidents narrated in my novels or short stories are not necessarily experienced or witnessed by me. I was never in the active battle; but I read accounts of it and heard numerous incidents from some of my fellow-officers who had participated in them. Later on I saw by my own eyes the places which were made memorable by the war. And I think that if you have the right objective information and are generally well-informed about the process of an incident, you can create the scene as objectively as you were an eye-witness. Give me the factual details and I will give a first-rate story.*<sup>8</sup>

Malgonkar makes his protagonist Kiran Garud to take part in the action in Distant Drum. Thus Malgonkar tries to fulfill his unfulfilled desire of becoming an active soldier which could not have been possible for him in real life. Archala Desai rightly points out that autobiographical novelist tries to "realise the achievement of a goal through the achievement of that goal by his protagonist in fiction. He may have his unfulfilled wishes fulfilled through the protagonist and achieve a satisfaction which fortune was not ready to bestow upon him in real life".<sup>9</sup>

Distant Drum tries to pursue the same goal and embody the same spirit in the fictional work which might have been Malgonkar's wish in real life. Malgonkar doesn't describe the personal life and the family background of Kiran Garud. The life of Kiran Garud is portrayed in relation to the military code of conduct. Therefore, in a way we can say that Distant Drum is a fictional documentation of the military code which Malgonkar holds most important in real life as well.

In one occasion, in the course of the novel Ropey Booker, an officer turned businessman tries to give him the big offer but Kiran plainly rejects the offer because he is a devoted army officer who is proud of his profession. No force makes him change his mind. But as P.P. Mehta points out, Malgonkar himself "in 1952, like Ropey Booker in Distant Drum, joined business and started operating manganese mine".<sup>10</sup> In the prologue to Distant Drum, Malgonkar explains what is the story about. "The book is largely

the story of the success or failure of the efforts of one of the officers of the Regiment to live upto its code."<sup>11</sup> It means that in order to keep the value of military code intact he purposely makes some changes in the novel and makes Kiran to reject the offer made by Ropey Booker. Here also Malgonkar tries to fulfil his unfulfilled desire. By using fictional impulses Malgonkar artistically turns the fact of life into fiction.

In Distant Drum the story is told by using third person narrator. The main purpose behind using the third person seems to be in the words of Philippe Lejeune, the author "pretends to speak about himself as someone else might, by using the third person, or by inventing a fictive narrative to present the author's point of view or tell his life story. Naturally, this takes place within the framework of a text controlled by an autobiographical pact".<sup>12</sup>

Rajgopalchari asserts that the novel goes on two levels. The one depicts the 'present action' and the other reveals the 'past action' in a continual series of flash back incidents. Rajgopalchari remarks that:

*The first movement covers Kiran's relationship with Bina Sonal, his service at the ridiculously procedure-bound D.W.P. office, and his 'active' service in the Kashmir front which ends up in cease-fire before fire broke out. Second movement gives out a series of incidents like Manners episode,*

*Margot Medley affair, Kiran's rigorous training at the Dehradun school, the Twin Pagoda Hill attack, the Burma war, the Delhi riots - all reflecting in many ways Kiran's growth as a soldier and his mental maturity.*<sup>13</sup>

Rajgopalchari further adds that -

*... these episodes are a direct transcription of the author's autobiographical experience and Malgonkar evidently feels at home in their presentation through Kiran. Each of these episodes is a well-built anecdote in itself.*<sup>14</sup>

The novel is divided into three parts. The Regiment, The Staff, and Active Service. In all these parts Kiran, the protagonist is at the centre. The main theme of Distant Drum is the growth of the protagonist Kiran Garud as an army officer who throughout the novel remains loyal to his profession as a duty-bound soldier. He holds the regimental code of conduct in high esteem. Apart from the main theme, it is the story of the union of lovers Kiran Garud and Bina Sonal. This is, of course, the romantic aspect of the novel and fictional; but Kiran's loyalty to his friend Abdul Jamal may have roots in reality. In other words, Distant Drum also portrays the ideal friendship between Kiran and Abdul Jamal. It also highlights the changing phase of Indian Army system and the Indian political situation. Above all, this novel upholds the importance of the regimental code of conduct which becomes a guiding force to the Army. Especially the three threads, Kiran-Bina

love affair, the development of the Satpura code and the decline of the Indian Army due to political interference are interlinked and frequently interact on one another; for instance, Gobind Ram Sonal's opposition to the marriage of Kiran and Bina Sonal, on the one hand, obstructs the smooth development of their love, on the other it tests Kiran's loyalty to the code. It also shows how administrative interference spoils the army efficiency.

The delineation of Indian Army life is authentic in the sense that Malgonkar tries to achieve the principle of verisimilitude by deftly converting his factual experiences of army life into the artistic framework of the novel, for example, in the first part of the novel, Regiment we find Kiran's clashes with the political leader Lala Vishnu Saran Dev, 'the chairman of the District Caangrus Committee'. He requests Kiran to offer the Shamiana for the minister's reception. But Kiran plainly rejects to give him the new Shamiana for the political activity. Then Lalaji threatens him.

*'Coynelsaab' he said, 'the paalitical party aaf which you taak so lightly is ruling thish country today. The days aaf treating us as a sheditious aarganization are gone. Now the party and the gournment are the shame. I would shay that in refuging this ishmall favour you are running a great rishk. ... You musht remember that thish will amount to belittling a minishter of the gournment aaf which you are a servant.*

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Here, the character of Lalaji is skilfully revealed through

the way he talks to Kiran. Here, we find Kiran's uprightness and sense of duty. However, Lalaji succeeds in getting the Shamiana when Kiran is transferred from the Regiment. Lala is a type of the the politicians who appeared on the Indian political scene after the freedom struggle who were morally degraded and corrupted.

Then, Kiran is transferred to Delhi and there again he comes across his beloved Bina and their relationship gets strengthened which forms an important theme in the second part of the novel. In the second part, Kiran encounters Bina's father, the Defence Secretary. This fact, however, as stated earlier is really fictional and romantic part of the novel; though, in spirit and in action the army code as embodied in Kiran Garud is authentic and held in high esteem by Malgonkar. Mr Sonal doesn't like the friendship between Kiran and Bina; and by using his political influence, Mr Sonal gets Kiran posted out of Delhi. Thus he succeeds in separating Bina from Kiran. He has other plans for his daughter, Bina. "Mr Sonal explains to Kiran why he had to manoeuvre his transfer, and promises to get him back 'when things get straightened out'".<sup>16</sup>

Kiran faces this situation with great courage. He gives Mr Sonal a straightforward answer:

*I am a career officer. To me the army, the profession itself, is a great thing, although in your sense of values it may rank with the lowest forms of life. ... And I am prepared to go along with you only for one reason: because I cannot afford to risk my professional future; to a career officer*

*like me, it is an unfortunate thing to clash with people of your influence. I am ready to give in only because I want to save something far more personal. My career to me is more important than anything else - more important than your daughter.*<sup>17</sup>

In describing Kiran's encounter with Mr Sonal as P.P. Mehta says, "... the author has avoided all cheap rhetoric and artificial stance so common in second rate novels. Indeed, the Indo-Anglian novel has flowered into maturity with Malgonkar".<sup>18</sup> One thing we have to note is that Kiran doesn't sacrifice his career for the sake of his love for Bina. In fact, both the things were important for him. All the same, he prefers army service.

The Margot Medley episode is concerned with Kiran's moral life: Margot, wife of Major Bob Medley is very beautiful and attractive woman. She helps Kiran Garud to 'grow up' in the real sense of the term and plays an important role in his emotional life in his early days in the Regiment. His liaison with Margot makes Col. Medley to commit suicide. After this incident Kiran feels guilty and thinks that he has done something wrong. He also thinks that he has spoiled the married life of Bob Medley. He takes all the blame on himself. It is a terrible blow to Medley. Therefore, Bob Medley puts a bullet through his head. This makes Kiran feel more guilty and he repents. as Malgonkar puts it, "He was not as much ashamed of himself as he was sorry for Bob Medley. For himself, he felt that it wasn't fair that anyone who had caused the ruin

of two lives could get away without any punishment".<sup>19</sup>

Since this affair, Kiran behaves in a very controlled manner. He takes utmost care not to risk his profession again; particularly with his beloved Bina, he behaves soberly at the critical hour of temptation. He decides never to imperil his career again by emotional entanglements.

Shyam Asnani has rightly pointed out that all other episodes add meaning to the central theme. He says, "There are other incidents also which add spice to the already delicious story, for example Kiran's earlier liaison with Margot Medley, Bob Medley's suicide and Delhi communal riots of 1947, which though romantic, have a stamp of authenticity".<sup>20</sup>

Ropey Booker is Kiran's ideal of Satpura code. Kiran is deeply impressed by Ropey Booker who is a devoted officer. However, Booker leaves the army and becomes a businessman. Kiran is shocked when he comes to know that Booker has become a 'box-wallah'. He tries to persuade Kiran to leave the army and become a businessman like him. But Kiran who has a firm conviction in his profession, doesn't yield to the offer made by Ropey Booker. He plainly rejects the offer. Here, we find his indomitable faith in his profession and the military code.

Instead of accepting the offer "Kiran felt sorry for Ropey. Had Ropey lost caste, had he jettisoned his code? This was not the man he knew, the man who, in his mind, had always represented

the ideal of a military commander. He caught himself wishing that Ropey Booker had died in the war, at the height of his glory - while still a colossus".<sup>21</sup>

Kiran's loyalty and dedication to the regimental code of honour can be seen when he tells Ropey Booker,

*We would be failing in our duty to these youngsters and to the future army if we were to quit. Well, it is something like those principles that the Satpuras live by, or try to live upto. No one can explain them, nor one can teach them. You have to find them out yourself, by taking out whatever is worthwhile from those who do make an honest effort to live upto them and by testing yourself. It is a sort of debt we have towards those who are new coming.*<sup>22</sup>

Booker is the man who taught Kiran the dignity of military code. As B.G. Joshi has pointed out, "Kiran's polite refusal to be tempted by Ropey's offer has an autobiographical source. Malgonkar was made a similar offer. He, however, succumbed to the temptation and later on perhaps repented about it".<sup>23</sup>

In delineating Kiran's character, Malgonkar has intentionally glorified the character of the protagonist by making him a devoted officer. Malgonkar himself was tempted by such offer. Now, this change in the character of Kiran artistically contributes to the significance of the central theme. The fact and fiction merge so deeply in the depiction of the army life that the autobiographical aspects are artistically converted into fiction without being noticed. In fact,

the glorification of the character of Kiran is a digression from the actual truth. We have to keep in mind a suggestion given by Avrom Fleishman that the author should resist the temptation to 'self-magnification' and 'extravagant self-denigration'. Malgonkar seems to have steered clear of these two extremes by stopping short at using his personal experience at a particular stage from where fiction begins. In actuality, Malgonkar becomes a 'box-wallah' but in the novel, he denies Kiran Garud that privilege.

In the third part, we find the Delhi riots of 1947 and Kiran's reaction to them which attract our attention. It was a horrible experience for Kiran than the war. Kiran and Abdul Jamal are two classmates of the Military Academy at Dehradun. They had fought together in Burma during the Second World War. Later, they joined their hands to put down the 1947 riots in Delhi. This description of the two army friends attempting to put down the fires of communal hatred has an authentic ring. Their friendship goes through a more rigorous test during the communal riots in Delhi. The Hindu-Muslim conflict had surged like a raging fire and Delhi looked like a battlefield with dead and injured bodies scattered in the streets. And fire and smoke hung over the city.

Both Kiran and Abdul try to bring the mob under control. They set out for rescue operation. They save some people from a fire-accident and a Hindu woman from being troubled by two Muslim fanatics. Then Kiran takes hold of one of the two Muslims and hands him over to the police. Later when Kiran goes into the mosque where

thirty thousand Muslims were taking shelter; one of the two assailants recognizes him and instigates others to kill him. At the same time Abdul comes there and protects him. This is a remarkable example of true friendship. Their friendship proves that caste and religion are just man-made boundaries but their friendship knows no such boundaries.

Malgonkar portrays ideal friendship between Kiran and Abdul Jamal. Their friendship seems to be based on mutual understanding. When in danger, they help each other. Rajgopalchari rightly highlights the events that occur in the novel which depict the best example of an ideal friendship.

*Malgonkar pays considerable attention to depict through their friendship the ideal human relationship. When Abdul Jamal was fatally wounded and left unconscious in the Burma war for the Sittang bridge and the retreat upto Thaungdwingyi, Kiran took his watch, photograph and papers from his wallet to send to his family in the event of Abdul's death. But Abdul survived and later appreciated Kiran as the sole friend who could have conveyed news of his death and his belongings to his family if he died. Again when Kiran was caught up in the scandalous involvement with Margot Medley, Abdul saved Kiran by keeping his name off the picture with his testimony at the court of inquiry about Bob Medley's death.*<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps, Malgonkar wants to suggest that strength of the friendship between Abdul Jamal and Kiran Garud is yet another aspect of

the army code of loyalty which stands the test of time. Even after the partition of India, their friendship continues though Jamal has joined the Pak Army. While posted on the borders of Kashmir, they once meet under the tree in No Man's land, chat together for a while drinking champagne with old war slogan of Satpuras:

"Come on Jawans!"

"Tigers don't live for ever!"<sup>25</sup>

Thus Distant Drum deals with the growth of the protagonist Kiran Garud through different vicissitudes. Kiran takes in the ethos and discipline of the British army and almost becomes "a near symbol of the Satpuras and a vague symbol of the Army itself and its code".<sup>26</sup>

Rajgopalchari highly praises Kiran's sincerity in his duty and brings out his valiant nature as he says:

*Kiran has won a military cross for his 'exemplary devotion to duty in the field of battle'. His valour and leadership in the Burma war elevate him to captaincy. Ropey has ordered him to stay back and nurse the wounded. He takes the wounded safely to the other side of the dangerous heights of the Buddha Hill where he successfully meets the machine gun attack from the Japanese. It was Kiran's first successful attack in which he relished 'a heady feeling of unmixed exultation' and nothing else could have given an infantry officer like him the <sup>same</sup> sense of fulfilment.*<sup>27</sup>

In his perceptive analysis, A.N. Dwivedi sums up the

growth and mental maturity of Kiran:

His relationships with 4th Satpuras, Abdul Jamal, and Miss Bina Sonal form the crux of the novel. He had fought against the Japanese in Burma and crossed twice the Sittang Bridge spanning a very dangerous river in a shaky raft. His reward comes after the war in the shape of the command of the 4th Satpuras. When shifted to the HQ in Delhi, he has to face certain problems created by jealous fellow-army officers. He then opts for an operational area, namely Kashmir, for his posting. And when things rotten to the core at Raniwada, the place where the 4th Satpuras are stationed, Garud is summoned by Gen. Spike Ballur to take over the reigns once again and build the Regiment from the shambles, Garud takes up this assignment with all enthusiasm and responsibility, but this time he goes to Raniwada along with his beloved, Miss Bina who has earlier rejected Mr. Arvind Mathur, a multi-millionaire of Bombay against the wishes of her father.<sup>28</sup>

Speaking about the characterization in Malgonkar's novels

Dwivedi remarks:

Malgonkar's characters include both types and individuals. Of the first category are the army men and the courtiers, the loyal ministers and the opportunistic leaders, the courtesans and the harlots, the prisoners and the businessmen, and of the second are Col. Kiran Garud, Henry Winton, Debi-dayal, Gian Talwar, Abhayraj and Nana Saheb. Sometimes the same character occurs

in more than one novel e.g. Kiran Garud appearing in both Distant Drum and Bandicoot Run.<sup>29</sup>

We may say that the 'typical' characters are actually more authentic and real than the other characters, who have in them romantic or fictional ingredients. That is, Dwivedi has pointed out that his women characters are sex symbols. He says:

*We do find women and children in Malgonkar's novels, but usually they are not allowed to develop fully. As for women, they mostly appear as symbols of sex and comfort, be they queens (like the mother and wife of Abhayraj in The Princess and Kashi in The Devil's Wind) or plebeians (like Sundari in A Bend in the Ganges, Ruby and Jean in Combat of Shadows, and Miss Bina in Distant Drum). Obviously, women play second fiddle to men in the works of Malgonkar, whose world is manifestly a world of men.*<sup>30</sup>

However, Dwivedi appreciates Malgonkar's plot construction and his ability to transform facts into fiction. He remarks:

*Malgonkar is a novelist endowed with 'a wonderful knack of weaving plots of singular originality. This he could achieve not because of his inclination towards historicity, but because of his ability to commingle fact with fiction and recorded truths with elements of romance and adventure, a historian blessed with a creative mind and a fertile imagination.*<sup>31</sup>

Distant Drum is a novel where we find Malgonkar, mixing

his material of facts and fiction in an entertaining manner, particularly his art of developing the plot of the novel. P.P. Mehta rightly says that "Distant Drum is indeed a story about the Indian Army, nay, more a documentary of the 4th Satpuras than history or fiction".<sup>32</sup>

Though Iyengar holds Distant Drum as a work of 'unusual distinction', critics like C. Paul Verghese and Haydn M. Williams criticise Malgonkar. C. Paul Verghese argues that "the chief weakness of Malgonkar's novels seems to arise out of his tendencies to concentrate his attention more on the erotic and melodramatic than on the worthwhile aspects of Indian life".<sup>33</sup>

However, Asnani refutes this statement by stating that "Mr. Verghese clearly seems to have underrated Malgonkar's deep involvement in the history of the country, his concern for values and his immense ability in the craft of fiction-writing. His fiction along with that of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand shows that the Indo-English novel has come of age".<sup>34</sup>

In Distant Drum Malgonkar makes use of flashback technique. For the sake of narrative structure, Malgonkar has divided his material into two parts: past and present. The first part is narrated through flashbacks, whereas the second part forms a continuous chronological narrative. The flashback covers a period of almost eleven years, and the continuous narrative covers a period of six months. The division, however, has a thematic significance. Distant Drum is a fine example of the artistic transformation of

factual experiences into the artistic framework of the novel. Kiran Garud, the protagonist of the Satpura code encounters the modern Indian politics and politicians. In fact, Malgonkar has given him an authentic historical stature. This device serves the purpose of giving a contrast between the steadfast army code of morality and the corrupt politicians who came on the scene after the partition.

G.S. Amur is right when he says that the remarkable feature of Distant Drum is the authenticity of its material, particularly as it relates to life in the army. He highly applauds Malgonkar as a novelist.

*The themes of Distant Drum so far as they are consciously developed are serious and mature enough. His craftsmanship, always competent, has attained the kind of sophistication, associated with the modern novel. He still prefers the closed-form - note the completion of the circle in Kiran's return to Raniwada and the contrived happy ending to his relationship with Bina - but his management of the point of view and the double time is the work of an expert.*<sup>35</sup>

We have already mentioned in chapter one that the task of the author is to present truth of his life in the artistic framework of the novel in such a way that he should be able to maintain the higher plane of verisimilitude. The point is that in Distant Drum Malgonkar has succeeded in maintaining the higher plane of verisimilitude by changing his factual experiences into fiction, using fictional impulses. Malgonkar's colleague, a brother officer major C.L. Proudfoot

aptly writes in his letter to Malgonkar, "You have recaptured the atmosphere of the earlier days faithfully and right through the whole book runs the golden thread of authenticity with never a false note".<sup>36</sup>

Manohar Malgonkar is a master story teller in the tradition of Somerset Maugham and John Masters. They may be termed as entertainers. And yet, Manohar Malgonkar's case is different in the sense that in his major novels including Distant Drum he makes use of his personal life and philosophy in an extremely readable text. His beliefs and convictions emerge as authentic after making sufficient discount to the entertainment value of the novel. Distant Drum is an excellent example which presents a moral contrast between the new code of morality of the politicians on the one hand, and the army code of loyalty and morality, on the other.

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