

The Linguistic Competence of Manohar Malgonkar

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Abstract:

This research paper illustrates The Linguistic Competence of Manohar Malgonkar. Branded as an entertainer and story teller, the deeper qualities of his fiction have been neglected or unperceived by many. The various articles by commentators do not seem to bring out the merits of the author as a significant Indo-English novelist. The few researchers who have taken up his novels seem to have failed to highlight his exceptional command over the English language. A casual reading of his novels may make the reader fall in line with the biased comments made by earlier critics. It is also intended to bring out a balanced view of the greatness of the author. Succumbing to this temptation also, this attempt to study the Linguistic Competence in Malgonkar's novels is made here. In this study I have taken up his five full-fledged and mature novels - Distant Drum, Combat of Shadows, The Princess, A Bend in the Ganges and The Devil's Wind.

Key words: Succumbing, Amateurish, Truncated, Vernacular, Veracity, Exaggeration, Exceptional.

1. Introduction:

Manohar Malgonkar was one of the prominent Indo-English novelists. Like Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and others, he was a prolific and voluminous writer. He was one of those few Indo-Anglian novelists who show how well an English literary form can be adapted to develop Indian themes and how effectively the English language can be used to express and convey Indian sensibility. Though a late entrant in the field of Indo-English fiction, Manohar Malgonkar has earned a considerable place with his five novels and four

volumes of short stories. The geographical location of his world is the Indian subcontinent ranging from the Himalaya in the north to the islands of Ceylon, Malaya, Singapore etc. in the South, from the Burmese jungles in the East to the Andamans and Western regions of undivided India. He has written about the things and people he knew mostly from his experience, in simple British English, without making use of the vernacular, except when justified by the occasion. **A. N. Dwivedi** says about him:

It is as a novelist with an accomplished technique and grounded firmly in the rich Indian tradition that he will survive in the days to come. (1985: 136)

He has enriched Indo-Anglian literature with his novels. He is undoubtedly a major novelist of the world.

Manohar Malgonkar (12 July 1913 – 14 June 2010), was a Marathi; and was brought up in a village named Jagalbet (which was forty miles away from garrison town of Belgaum) in princely state of Indore. He was educated in Bombay and worked as a Guide for sufficiently long time. He read Sanskrit and English literature. He served in Indian Army from 1935 to 1952. Later on, he joined business. For quite some time he was in America also. All these lead him to maturity. His experiences were deeply rooted in practicality of life. His services as a Shikari and Soldier made him bold, brilliant and practical. After retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel he wanted to give vent to his experiences. So he felt better to come to journalism. But his keen and penetrating vision did not let him stay outside the creative literature. Since childhood he was a rajor-like vision that helped him to see the real life of the princes, kings and queens. He spent his childhood in princely and thoroughly knew not only the external but also the back-stage life of the feudal in the 20th century. Surely, his

writings are based on his experiences throughout his life. **G. S. Amur** writes:

Manohar Malgonkar was a shikari, and a soldier before he ventured into the profession of writing and he is far from being indifferent to professional success; and this for him means reaching wide audiences in English speaking countries through foreign imprints...have found publishers in England and America and have been- translated into several European and Indian languages. (1973: 10)

As he comes from a well-to-do family, he cannot be considered to be professional writer who writes for money. We know, we have two types of writers-Amateurish and professional, and it runs without question that Monohar Malgonkar is amateurish writer with his own vision of life to be communicated to his readers.

2. Linguistic Competence:

The linguistic achievement of Malgonkar is definitely commendable. Long ago, **Raja Rao** visualized the difficulty of an Indian writer in English when he pointed out the characteristic contrast between thought and medium of expression, between the “The tempo of Indian life” and “an alien language” (1989: 5-6). The objection of scholars to the use of English, such as **McCutchion** raises, has been due to the fact that such a non-native English lacks the ‘fineness of nuance’ (1969: 11). The English of Malgonkar is mainly traditional and conservative, but it is full and exact, as the B. B. C. correspondent John Morris has reported. Though Malgonkar is fully aware of the linguistic dilemma of the Indian writer in English, he has used English in a natural and spontaneous way, drawing his nuances from his close contact with the British officials in the Indian Army and with the other ranks of Britishers outside. He may not be as inventive as Raja Rao, or as impressive as R. K. Narayan, or as vernacular as Mulk Raja Anand, but he is always readable and enjoyable. The reason is that Malgonkar keeps an eye open for a ready market and prefers “acceptability” to “experimentation” (**Amur**, 1973: 18). He claims to have acquired ‘a fairly full vocabulary of raw words’

which he uses effortlessly. Here is an instance of the natural conversation of a drinks party in one of the Delhi restaurants:

“Not another, no,”
 “Nonsense, I insist; gin’s quite harmless,”
 “Sam’s absolutely wizard.”
 “Absolutely.”
 “If you really swear gin is harmless; then just a wee little one.”
 “Moochoo’s terrific, absolutely terrific!”
 “Who saya so?”
 “Abdaaaar!” (*Distant Drum*, 180).

In this extract, the language has become completely truncated; not a single word is used more than needed. And the last word in this conversation catches up the air of reality and naturalness; it is a vernacular by all means. Similar expressions may also be traced in Malgonkar’s other works too, particularly when he tries to recapture the real speech of British officers in the Indian Army or that of hardcore hunters. In *Combat of Shadows*, Winton, who is curious mixture of the two kinds of people specified above, exclaims as follows on hearing the death-news of Eddie Trevor: “ ‘Boy! . . . Boy!’ Where’s that damned brandy-pani? Juldi” (268). This is the living speech of a typical Anglo-Indian saheb. It is no wonder, then, that the novelist’s linguistic excellence made a correspondent of the *Times Literary Supplement* once write that a “new Malgonkar in a Piccadilly book-stall puts the seal on British achievement” (1964: 966).

3. Spellings:

Like Mulk Raj Anand, he changes the spelling of the words to indicate the half-educated position of Indian political leaders and to give an Indian touch to the speech — as ‘aan’ for ‘on’, ‘yaas’ for ‘yes,’ ‘faar’ for ‘for,’ ‘ishport’ for ‘sport,’ and ‘gownment’ for ‘government’ (*Distant Drum*, 61).

Bernard Shaw has also made use of the artistic device of particularising character by distorting the spelling of the English words in his play *Candida*. He distinguishes Burgess who is illiterate from Morell who is an intellectual and religious guide of the people. Burgess says to Morell, "When I gev you arsh words in my natral disappointment, you turned my daughter again me" (1960: 14). Malgonkar is not as inventive as Raja Rao or as vernacular as Mulk Raj Anand, but he does give a touch of Indianess atoa his characters by making them use Hindi words such as 'izzai,' 'ullo,' 'Arri,' 'maara' (*Distant Drum*), 'Sansar,' 'Toba,' 'arre' (*A Bend in the Ganges*), 'Zidda' (*Combat of Shadows*), 'Dada' and 'Shabash' in *The Princes*. Malgonkar makes further subtle distinction between 'tu' and 'aap' (in place of you) in *A Bend in the Ganges*, which is relevant in the Indian context. The use of 'thou' in place of 'tu' would not achieve the same effect. **Shakti Batra** says, "Exclamations of surprise, wonder and joy, such as 'Toba, Toba,' 'shabash' 'Hai, Hai,' 'Harey Ram,' 'Arre,' 'Hai Allah,' 'Yaah' and 'thu' add to the overall realism and authenticity of characters" (1975: 91).

4. Sanskrit and English Literatures:

Malgonkar studied both Sanskrit and English Literatures at the University and has done a lot of reading since then. Amur says, "With **Raja Rao** he shares strong love for Sanskrit and Indian tradition, but not the metaphysical concern. . ." (1973: 23). Ages ago Bhamaha had defined historical novel which is known as Akhyayika in Sanskrit literature. According to Bhamaha, "The subject-matter gives facts of actual experience . . . scope may be allowed to poetic invention" (De, 1947: 202). Bana presented the story of Harsavardana, his contemporary sovereign in fictional mode far back in the 7th century A. D. in his famous Akhyayika, *Harsa-carita*.

To present contemporary history in the fictional form was the greatest contribution of Sanskrit literature to the world literature. Malgonkar seems to be fully aware of the native tradition of presenting contemporary history in fictional mode. But here too he is not a blind follower of Bhamaha and Bana. Bana wrote *Harsa-carita* "more as a romantic story than as a sober history of the king's life" (De, 1947: 228). Besides, he described the contemporary society against the background of a historical personage.

Malgonkar accepts Bana's tradition of mixing fact with fiction in his novels. **Rajagopalachari** says: "Malgonkar strives to achieve the artistic integration of history and fiction" (1989: 70) in his novels. But Malgonkar accepts the tradition of Bana with a greater leaning towards facts than towards fiction. He says it himself:

I take great pains to be absolutely accurate. If I write that something happened on a Saturday or on a moonless night, you can be sure it was on a Saturday or on a moonless night. (Amur, 1973: 15)

It is difficult to fault Malgonkar's historical veracity. Amur says about his novel, "*The Devil's Wind* is more history than novel" (1973: 135). But unlike Bana, he presents historical forces and conflicts characterizing any particular period of Indian history against the background of fictional characters, except in *The Devil's Wind*. Besides, he does not take liberties with facts.

5. Colloquial English:

He learnt the colloquial English from books and his direct contacts with native speakers while he was in army. He developed friendship with many Englishmen and enjoyed the native English with them. The influence was natural. Defending himself from the charge of 'withdrawal' he says:

Well, for two years of my Army service I was in daily contact with British other ranks and can thus claim to have acquired a fairly full vocabulary of raw words which I can use far more naturally than those who have discovered only a few of them since 'Fanny Hill' was printed in paperback. If I don't use them, it is because I know that to those who use them most familiarly they are no more than expletives utterly meaningless, a sort of pause-filling device to substitute for the 'ears' and 'ahams' of a different class, and even more, because in my style of writing they would be wholly out

of place. (*The Directory of British and American Writers*)

It is true that he doesn't make experiment with English language to attune to his tone like Raja Rao. But it is also true that he (Malgonkar) succeeds in conveying the spirit of India and Indian ethos. He is aware of the problems of the Indo-Anglian "to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit is one's own. (Rao, 1989: Foreword)

Malgonkar's hobbies- love for literature; especially poetry, hunting classical music etc. have given ample material for his novels. His taste is refined. It is no exaggeration to put him as one of the first four Indo-Anglian novelists and for sheer power of telling an arresting story, one is tempted to put him above every other novelist- a major novelist from whom we can expect still high achievements. (Mehta, 266)

6. Conclusion:

On the whole, it goes without question that Manohar Malgonkar is an eminent Indo-Anglian writer with unusual distinction. And his greatness lies in his originality and freshness of interpretation. He has a razor-like vision assisted by his immense talent, perceptive and brilliant mind and rare combination of artist-cum-designer's competence. The noted Caribbean writer, V. S. Naipaul, aptly observes that Malgonkar is outstanding for his fondness for outdoor life. Other writers might sound bookish or imitative, but Malgonkar does not. Though most of his recent works tend to thrillers and entertainers, his popularity as a novelist is already established on a sound footing. It may be that, for chronological, historical and other related reasons, he does not rank with 'the Big Three' in the field of Indo-English fiction, but he is still a force to reckon with and not to be forgotten by the posterity. Khuswant Singh rightly places him among the select band of seven Indo-English writers and characterises his monumental work, *A Bend in the Ganges*, as one of the few books that are "samples of good writing by Indo-Anglian writers of today" (1974: 284). For his unmistakable historical sense, for his outdoor freshness, and for his flawless plot-construction and engrossing story-telling, Malgonkar remains almost matchless in contemporary Indo-English fiction. But it is a matter of regret that his contribution to the genre we refer to today as Indian Writing English remains largely unacknowledged. However we must remember that Manohar was a prolific writer whose prose and grip of the English language was as good

as any of his contemporaries. There is no doubt that he was one of the last of a generation that has living memories of events that changed our nation's history and society in the most profound way.

In '*Bend in the Ganges*' Manohar is in full flow and one cannot but appreciate that not only he was a master story teller, but also had an exceptional command over the English language. No less than a writer of the caliber of RK Narayan referred to Malgonkar as his "favorite Indian novelist in English," was also translated into several European languages. Let us hope that Lt Col Manohar will be given his due in the years to come.

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