

BREAKING NEW GROUND: MANOHAR MALGONKAR'S SPY FICTION

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Abstract

A study of the trajectory of Indian fiction in English from the point of view of popular culture and literature throws up some interesting paradoxes. It is possible to see most writing practices in Indian English fiction and critical praxis as having followed the British creative writing and academic research and critical responses. While at the same time it also possible to point out the selective way in which this imitation has been practiced. This paper is an attempt to bring to light a latent prejudice. The paper proposes to illustrate this by showing how an acknowledged and critically acclaimed Indian writer, Manohar Malgonkar's fiction has met with a mixed reception indicative of a deeply entrenched prejudice against spy fiction – a popular literary genre. Indeed, it would not be difficult to prove that spy narratives in film versions have received tremendous mass approval and of late some scholarly attention. Thus, the paper's covert argument is that the Indian academia and critical apparatus suffers from a deep-rooted bias. A clear example of this is the number of articles and research engagements with the fiction of Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi while on writers such as Mukul Deva and Shashi Warriar are almost non-existent.

Key Terms: Manohar Malgonkar, Indian spy fiction in English, bias in Indian academia

Introduction:

Of all the anomalies that exist in IWE (however much contested the term may be) and its academic negotiations in the form of curriculum design, critical reception, and other canon conferents, the case of Manohar Malgonkar is, perhaps, one of the most curious. Hailed as one of 'most distinguished contemporary Indian novelists', '... a literary giant in India' and 'a novelist of unusual distinction' (Miglani 2009 Preface, vi) of the second generation of writers, his novels, most notably *A Bend in the Ganges*, *Combat of Shadows*, *Devils Wind* and *The Princes*, are prescribed in the IWE curricula in most Indian universities. Interestingly, his works have been the subject of a number of full length critical studies (at least 8), and more than 50 scholarly articles and papers published in reputed journals and books edited by fairly well-known English teachers in India (Padmanbhan 2002: 140 – 150, Miglani 2009: 195 – 200). Apart from these, 14

doctoral dissertations on Malgoankar have also been submitted to universities located all over India and awarded degrees till 2000 (Kushwaha & Nazeem 2000: 210-211). From the point of view of the present paper, these statistics are as much interesting, as they are curious and strange, rendered so because of the glaring neglect and the selective nature of the critical engagement with his works. The critical forays clearly indicate the faultlines along which Indian Writing in English and its critical apparatus evolved and developed acquiring an elitist focus and thrust (Prabha 2000: 1 -17). The point that the paper would like to make, at the outset, is that not a single study, brief or long, has meaningfully engaged with the issue of mapping Malgonkar's praise worthy effort at importing the spy fiction genre and indigenizing it by providing 'a local habitation'.

The novel as a form in itself, in Indian writing in English, and the regional languages, as it is already well-known, emerged out of the colonial encounter as were most writing practices in English in India. It is possible, now, to say that IWE has acquired a distinct concern, character and style of its own. But it is also well documented that it, in all matters of form, theme and style, in its nascent years, grew imitating the 'English' writing practices. The IWE writing practices underwent innumerable phases in its evolution before arriving at a writing culture authentically, yet debatably, 'Indian'. While certain genres have received the benefit of this 'liberal' thinking, the same has not been extended to spy fiction, a literary form and genre typically identified with the masses, in other words, the 'popular'. The case of Malgonkar's *Bandicoot Run* is an instanceⁱ.

This brief paper is an attempt to show how Malgonkar forged a writing practice that, in effect, was a pioneering venture as it grappled with the issues of effectively translocating a writing culture and harmonizing it with the canonically accepted larger issues of historical engagements, and, however farfetched and clichéd the comparison, like a veritable Prometheus bringing fire to the lesser mortals, putting it within the reach of the masses. The argument for Malgonkar assumes importance for two reasons, one, his attempt to experiment with a genre not attempted in Indiaⁱⁱ. Secondly, his attempt to chart the history of an era and area that was being increasingly made inaccessible to the common man while exploiting the potential of the genre. Conferring critical attention on a spy novel and reading it as a historical record as well as a 'mere' form of entertainment can be highly enlightening – an exercise rarely attempted before.

Malgonkar is reported to have said that the novel *Bandicoot Run* was based on a real incident of a file that was deliberately destroyed in the South Block to help an officer. The incidents that are alluded to in the novel are connected with General Thimmayya's handing over his resignation to Prime Minister Nehru in 1959 protesting Defense Minister V.K. Krishna Menon's refusal to consider his plans for preparing the Army for the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. It is said that Nehru refused to accept it and persuaded him to withdraw his resignation. However, little action was taken on Thimmayya's recommendations and he soon retired. When Thimmayya's term as army chief ended, Nehru and Menon ignored Thimmayya's recommendation to appoint General Thorat as the army chief, preferring Pran Nath Thapar. Where Thorat was known as a 'fighting general' in the mould of Patton and Rommel, Thapar was known to be politically well connected and related to Nehru by marriage (Surjeet)

As it transpired, another politically connected General, Brij Mohan Kaul was appointed the commander of the Indian forces in the vital northeast sector. Well documented sources report that Kaul was to earn eternal infamy by running away from the battlefield to get himself admitted in a Delhi hospital when the Chinese attacked in 1962. The novel, as it addresses the Indian reader, fictionalizes the intrigues and conspiracies that rocked the hallowed portals of the Army

and high offices in the turbulent years that followed the Independence, partition and with the ever rising Indo-Pak animosity (Sookta).

The novel opens with a brief prologue which is dated 7th March 1961. Set in the glaringly lit map room of the Directorate of Inter Services Intelligence (the ISI) of the Defence Ministry building in Rawalpindi, the preface provides details of a meeting of top ranking members in the Pakistani army. The members in attendance are men drawn from the three Pakistani military services: two each from the Army, the Navy and the Air Force and is presided by the Director of ISI, Maj Gen Kadar Hussain, ‘a large man, a Pathan who had become fat’ (Malgonkar, 1982:9). The meeting concerns a folder marked red with a bold diagonal cross which contains extremely sensitive information about the Indian Army – sensitive because the contents and details are supposed to be top secret. The information in the folder placed before them gives accurate details of a top secret conference of the Indian Services Chiefs that is to take place on 11th March – the nature of the information is so confidential that even the participants, the Services Chiefs, themselves have not been informed! What is more disturbing for an Indian reader is the fact that the folder contains the full text of the exercise.

This is the stuff most espionage fiction is made up of. In itself, to the uninitiated in espionage fiction, the details in the prologue may seem unimportant and ordinary, but anyone reading a thriller is at once alerted and an Indian thriller buff reading is all the more concerned as the matter concerns a leak in the highest echelons which presents a threat to the national security. Given the relationship India has had with Pakistan since the partition and continues to have, clearly this presents a threat, though the reader may be an outsider to the protocols and procedures of the Nation’s covert and espionage activities.

Reddy gave another curt laugh. “There’s a very good reason, Mr. Nadkar, and you must forgive me if I don’t go into details. It goes back to the time when I was DDSI (Deputy Director of Services Intelligence). I discovered that the amount of secret information that leaked to Pakistan was quite shocking. (Malgonkar 1982: 159)

Malgonkar was following the conventions of the genre – a genre that emerged in the last quarter of the 19th Century in the wake of rampant xenophobia. This genre, more than any other, tied itself to international politics and social tensions. (Bloom 1990:1). He, it appears, was acquainted with the genre’s conventions. The Second World War and the Cold War had provided ample material and background for numerous spy novels that spawned in Europe. Malgonkar indigenizes his novel by setting it in the backdrop of the uneasy Indo-Pak relations.

The novel proper begins with a section of members from the Indian armed forces desperately tracking a file that has gone missing, the contents of which are not revealed for at least three reasons: the first concerns the demands made by the plot. The plot of a spy thriller, in order to be made plausible is forced to deploy the realistic mode, which the best of the practitioners of the genre scrupulously adhered to as the examples of Len Deighton (notably *The Ipcress File* [1962]) where even the protagonist’s name is not revealed and John le Carre (*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), and *Tinker Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1976)) indicate. The army men working secretly are forced to enlist the assistance of a former army man, and so an ‘outsider’, ‘Kite’ Nadkar, a man who had enrolled into the army reluctantly:

Nadkar had not enjoyed being in the army, and could not imagine himself making a career of soldiering. He thought life dull and restrictive and he had also convinced himself that he would never make an ideal officer. What with all this, he had made it amply clear to those around him that he was only waiting for the war to be over to resign his commission (Malgonkar 1982:11)

His assistance is necessary because his last posting in the army had been in the records section. Thus a well-worked out plot requirement validates the need for suppression: because Nadkar is an ‘outsider’ and so cannot be told about the contents, but his assistance is vital as his last posting in the army was in the records section from where the file has gone missing.

The second concerns the demands made by the technique. Though the novel does not employ the first person narrative strategy, all events are seen through the eyes of Nadkar, possibly because he is an ‘insider-outsider’ and so is the safest bet within the framework of the narrative strategy to provide an objective account. Malgonkar must have had le Carre in his mind for, le Carre brought moral ambiguity into the wholly patriotic spy novel, reflecting the doubts and divisions of the cold war period as in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963). By making Nadkar the narrative powerhouse, Malgonkar consciously guards himself against the possibility of the novel degenerating into a kind of inane jingoism that such novels are prone to. Moreover, this arrangement imparts the novel with a complexity over and beyond the usual range of second-rate spy novels.

The third reason concerns the demand made by the genre which necessitates suppression of the information, because it is a spy thriller; the novel has to subscribe to the demands made by the genre’s convention which is to create excitement. The genre employs several means to create excitement, and one such is the suppression of certain vital information. However, an admission like this renders the argument presented in the paper vulnerable to the criticism that spy thrillers are predictableⁱⁱⁱ. The paper would like to point out this criticism has been leveled against all popular fiction genres (Nash 1990:3). This critical stand against the spy thriller is typical of the objections directed at popular fiction by the canonical modernists who privileged innovation above all things. But for a spy thriller predictability has never been a problem, and this cynical view foregrounding predictability denies the possibility of excitement. This is a much misunderstood aspect of a thriller that brings to fore a lack of awareness among the detractors who have not distinguished between a detective novel and a thriller, though it must be admitted that a detective novel could be found ‘thrilling’. A detective novel is constrained by the conventions imposed by its genre and thus has to depend upon unpredictability, while a thriller depends upon the realization of predictable events or lack of it as both have the potential to create the ‘thrill’.

As Malgonkar skillfully unfolds the plot, the reader is drawn into a vortex of violent action and the narrative acquires the characteristic raciness of a thriller. The unfolding of the plot involves making the reader aware of a conspiracy initiated by a power hungry Army General named Behl who is ‘working like a beaver to get rid of those who (stand) in his way of becoming the Chief’ (Malgonkar 1982: 64). Behl is represented as a cunning two-timer, more reminiscent of a manipulative politician than an army officer^{iv}. The ‘insanely ambitious’ man is ‘determined to take over the country’s government’ – in a military coup of the kind seen in Pakistan and Burma (Malgonkar 1982:16, 64).

Typical of the narrative conventions of a thriller, the reader is made aware of the contents of the file that provides the ‘objective correlative’ to the novel only towards the end of the novel. The ‘missing file’, in fact, contains some vital information that could have posed procedural barriers to Behl’s ambitions (Malgonkar 1982: 190).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to see why Malgonkar preferred the spy genre. The army as an institution works in an atmosphere of complete secrecy. The secrecy is validated by usual the claim that it is a ‘sensitive’ sector and cannot be made accessible to the masses as it could jeopardize the nation’s security. This curtain of secrecy, as Malgonkar shows, allows the personnel to become immune to any public accountability which in turn provides an open run to conspire and engage in self-serving pursuits, subordinating the interests of the nation. And how can a select few people decide what is good for the nation? Isn’t the nation synonymous with the people living in it? What logic answers the question: Why is it necessary to keep secrets from the very people that the secrets are to intended to protect? By using a form associated with mass culture, Malgonkar brings an institution shrouded in secrecy to the domain of common knowledge, the kind that does not get into the papers (Malgonkar 1982: 177).

Sadly, a genre with so much potential has not yet found any visibility in the Indian academia. Perhaps the reason for this strongly entrenched disregard is instructive. In other words, the literature syllabus, as designed in most Indian universities, consists of a corpus of texts – the canon – and a method of teaching that is based on progressive refinement of aesthetic response. The two components reinforce each other, in that the method makes sense given the texts and the selection of texts makes sense given the method. Indeed, though critical engagements with this literary genre are almost invisible, it is heartening to note that two young writers, Mukul Deva (*Lashkar* [2008], *Salim Must Die* [2009], *Tanzeem* [2011]) and Shashi Warriar (*Sniper* [2000]) have begun to thread the new ground in Indian fiction in English forged by Malgonkar.

Notes

ⁱ .Incidentally, another spy novel that Malgonkar wrote before *Bandicoot Run, The Spy in Amber* (Orient paperbacks, 1971) has also met with the same fate. Both of them have been victims of “the conspiracy of silence among Indian critics over Malgonkar’s achievement as a novelist” (Padmanabhan 2002: 3)

ⁱⁱ The feat is remarkable when considered in the background of the knowledge that several canonical British and American writers, Graham Greene, for instance, attempted and attracted critical attention for their use of the genre while none of the Indian writers did..

ⁱⁱⁱ Umberto Eco takes this line of argument to its extreme limit in his analysis of Ian Fleming’s fiction as he compares the plot in Fleming’s novels to a chess game (Eco 2000:115 – 120)

^{iv} Malgonkar’s Behl is clearly meant to be Kaul, notice the attempt at rhyme. Very early in the novel Behl is represented as a soldier with cold feet. An anathema to soldiering, though he has “gone through six years of war without leaving a peace station “, he has been presented with the command of a brigade (Malgonkar 1982:17)

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