
Let’s start with a quiz. Complete this sentence: ‘Oh gosh, sir; I think the thing I would most like to do in all the world right now is to …’

Manohar Malgonkar was one of the novelists regularly celebrated in the early days by Commonwealth Literature scholars, usually because his novel *The Princes* could be compared with Mulk Raj Anand’s *The Private Life of an Indian Prince*, or his *A Bend in the Ganges* could be included in studies of fictional treatments of the Indian independence struggle and of Gandhi in particular. Most of the critical work on him dates from the mid-1970s, runs for a decade and then tapers off. This is partly because the novelist, as a former military man and big game hunter, presented an often unfavourable position towards Indian politicians in his books, and because he chose to write in English, but also because as Indian writing in English became acceptable in university studies his admittedly commercial impulse and popular genre fiction (adventure, romance, espionage, war) came to seem jejune by comparison with more literary stylists. With Indian English fiction now an established field, both commercially and as a focus for scholarship, and with new editions of Malgonkar’s work coming out from Rupa and Indiaink/Roli, it is time that a new book should appear assessing the œuvre of someone R.K. Narayan declared to be one of his favourite writers.

What we have is a well-written study in the old style of ‘descriptive appreciation’. In fact, the author – a senior figure in India’s Sahitya Akademi – wrote most of the book in the 1980s, later updating it and incorporating some feedback from Malgonkar himself. Dr Rao provides us with a thorough outline of all the books – nine novels and four collections of stories, not counting nonfiction – appropriately weighing them according to questions of craft (mainly characterisation, plausibility of plot, manipulation of readers’ sympathies, and internal consistency of dating and behaviour). Craft is the appropriate focus in that Malgonkar made no claims to be more than a writer of popular entertainments designed to swell his income.

Malgonkar’s credentials as an Indian English novelist stem either from his ability to tell a ripping yarn or from his focus on historical settings. His output in fact covers events in modern India from early 1940s colonial life, through Partition, hostilities with Pakistan, the formation of Bangladesh and Indira Gandhi’s ‘Emergency’. He also writes a novel favourably revaluing Nana Saheb’s role in the ‘Mutiny’ (The Devil’s Wind) and his most critically approved work, *A Bend in the Ganges*, providing a comprehensive view of disparate political strategies and conflicted personal motives in the Independence movement. Rao does a good job of showing the merits of these books, and productively uses his text-based approach to defend *The Princes* against V.S. Naipaul’s misuse of some scenes in the novel to denounce the Indian social order by showing the logic and significance of actions according to the characters’ experiences within the novel.

As is common in much of the scholarship on Indian English writers, the books are not only discussed from a self-sufficient New Critical viewpoint, but are also cited only from the Indian editions (here mainly Orient paperbacks, many of them undated). This limits what can be said about them. D.S. Rao does point to the regular glossing of Indian words with phrases suggesting a non-Indian readership. He also explains the unusually light-hearted nature of *Open Season* by recording its origins as a commissioned (but never filmed) screenplay for US viewers. However, unless we know, for example, that in addition to Malgonkar’s wanting to write in English to maximise his sales, *Combat of Shadows* appeared first with Hamish Hamilton in London and Viking in New York before it came out in India, we cannot fully account for this story, with its constant references to Jim Corbett.
and its astonishing ventriloquism of colonial romance fiction. Rao credits Malgonkar with complexity of characterisation and keeping us onside with the leading characters in this book by allowing British characters to have sexual relations across the colonial race barrier, but the fact remains that the Indians in the novel are dumb or sly or hissing vengeance, the Eurasians are stereotypically brash or wanton, and the protagonist plantation manager is basically racist. As a colonial romance, the story is well-constructed, and it is true that the rash young white man is given his flaws and his come-uppance, but the real success of the novel is its amazing act of ventriloquism: the world of clubs and shikar and chota pegs that Malgonkar could only have known secondhand through his associations with princely families, post-independence tea plantations and the residual anglo rituals of the military mess. Once we know the publishing history, we can understand why an Indian writer would produce such a book and how Malgonkar got to be one of the highest earning novelists in English from India (before Rushdie hit the scene). We can also understand how this novel might not fare as well amongst Indian critics trying to establish nationalist credentials for Indians writing in English, and why a book like *A Bend in the Ganges* would have received more attention as part of ‘Commonwealth Literature’ studies. Rao’s observation that Malgonkar steadily includes more Indian words with less explanation might be explained by a contextual reference to the international audience becoming more familiarised with writing from the subcontinent, but also by Malgonkar’s apparent recourse to Indian publishers from 1978 and a contemporary market within India for English-language books.

Rao’s primary conclusion about Malgonkar’s work is that his love of unexpected twists, contrastive parallels and reversals shows a vision of life similar to Thomas Hardy’s grim humour in ‘life’s little ironies’, though he implies that Malgonkar’s ironies are a touch less bleak. This may ultimately be so because the novelist is really only setting out to write entertainments, and that may continue to limit critical regard. However, new attention to the middlebrow, to ecocritics (Malgonkar forsook his hunting to become a wildlife protection advocate and his books mention constructing dams as a disruptive but progressive part of national building), to the sociology of literature and new historicism may well follow the lead of Rao’s revisiting of this readable body of work. His book itself is elegantly produced and makes a worthy addition to collections on modern Indian literature.

And (remember the quiz?) the rest of the sentence (from *Combat of Shadows*) is: ‘shoot a rogue elephant.’

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