

**The Portrait of the British Indian Army in Manohar Malgaonkar's Distant Drum**

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**Abstract**

The present article aims at introducing the psychological unrest and strong distrust among the characters in Manohar Malgaonkar's *Distant Drum* (1960). A sincere attempt has been made to display the raging conflicts and dilemma in the minds and hearts of those characters who become, as if appears, the victims of time and situation. It also focuses on the traditions of the British Indian army as projected in the novel.

**Key Words:** Infantry, Regimental, Partition, cantonment, imperialism, assailants, cognizance

Manohar Malgaonkar's first novel *Distant Drum* derives from his personal experience as an army officer. He is able to give an inside picture of army life in the novel as he served in the infancy, in counter intelligence, and on the Army General staff during World War II as Lieutenant Colonel. He dwells on the thrilling aspects of army life in India at the critical juncture of the partition days. He has chosen to depict an ardent Soldiers fulfillment in living up to the code honored by the Regimental life. The novel is also an initiation story as it traces the growth of its protagonist, col. Kiran Garud, through a variety of his encounters with men and situations. Kiran imbibes the ethos and discipline of the British Army and almost becomes a 'near symbol of the Satpurus and a vague symbol of the army itself and its code.'

The novel is rendered into two movements- one depicting the present action and the other dealing with the past action in a continual series of flash-back incidents. The first moment covers Kiran's relationship with Bina Sonal, his service at

the ridiculously procedure bound DWP office, and his 'active' service at the Kashmir front which ends up in cease fire before fire broke out. The 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 moral maturity. These episodes are a direct transcription of the Author's autobiographical experience and Malgonkar evidently feels at home in their presentation through Kiran.

The experiences of Army Life depicted in the novel, however have a stamp of originality, and warrant no extraneous comparisons. Malgonkar provides minute details of the breaking- in of new officers known as bum warts, the motive behind the practice, the role of the senior most wart, the meticulously observed ceremonies in the officers' mess, the rituals and the drills observed to the letter, the protocol for different occasions, the qualities required of the officers and those

displayed by the commanding officers, the embarrassment caused by uncommitted and unprofessional Emergency. Commissioned officers, the danger posed by political officers and politicians and even the peccadilloes of the officers and their wives. C.L. Proudfoot is right when he praises “the golden thread of authenticity” that runs through the novel “with never a false note.” In spite of the stamp of authenticity and its “feeling for form and atmosphere”, Distant Trump does not always succeed in realizing the character with force. Kiran alone is a convincing character and others like Bina, Abdul Jamal, Mr. Sonal, Arun Sanwal, Ropey Broker, Bull Hampton fall to throb with life. The whole interest of the novel centers round the character of Kiran whose quest for fulfillment in his profession imparts to him a measure of nobility and dignity. Kiran looks at his profession not merely as an ambition “a means of earning a living; it has rather been an end in itself.” Kiran discovers his identity as a true soldier committed to his duty unlike his British capital Ropey Booker who suddenly deserts his profession only to turn into a “box-wallah.”

Ropey, the soldier turned businessman, by asking Kiran ‘to chuck the army’ and join his show of the Imperial Metals Company, has “suddenly shrunk” to the normal stature of a ‘sleek, slightly theoretical civilian’ in the eyes of Kiran. Kiran just could not understand the “code” to which Ropey was bound. He could only feel sorry for him. Ropey fails to appreciate the inexplicable code that the Satpuras live by. Kiran’s whole endeavor is to live to that code. The high-flown lecture on the duty and obligation of a soldier is an indirect reproof of Ropey who failed to fulfill this

task. The rigorous training that Kiran received at the academy was not a waste. It really hardened his spirits and increased his “resistance to stress.”

Kiran has won a military cross for his “exemplary devotion to the duty in the field of battle.” His valor and leadership in the Burma war elevated him to captaincy. He has obeyed Ropey and nursed 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 same sense of fulfillment. Kiran and his men suffer a crushing defeat ‘a crowning indignity’ when the Sittang Bridge was blown off by the Japanese. But Kiran feels satisfied only when he, along with some of his followers, crosses the bridge again in 1945 exulting as though in “a form of revenge, a fulfillment.”

Kiran’s fulfillment in his duty is not of a ridiculous “military mind” that goes by hard and fast rules alone. He has his human side in his relationship with his friend Abdul Jamal forever just because he happened to be in the opposite camp. After the cease fire, he drinks champagne with his erstwhile colleague Abdul Jamal “under the bushy – topped tree”. Although the meeting was purely non-political and sentimental, Kiran had faced the wrath of his higher officials. Brigadier Swarup takes it as “a plain case of conduct unbecoming of an officer.” Kiran feels that in the stupid rigidity of the rules, “the very essence of friendship, frankness, had been completely drained off.”

“He knew that the Brigadier was finding it unpleasant to have to make a report of such nature against one of the own battalion commanders, and yet his sense of duty combined with limited vision, which is almost the hallmark of the military mind, would not permit him to act otherwise in the matter.”

Though Kiran was perfectly convinced that he had done nothing wrong, it was of no avail to argue with such ‘military minds’. Many of his friends appreciate his nature and the matter ends up with a mild warning from General Torgal.

Kiran- Abdul episode proves that true friendship knows no bounds of narrow contorted rules or community hatred. In the Delhi riots when both Hindus and Muslims resort to “Ghoulisn enormities unknown to primitive men”, Kiran and Abdul set out for rescue operations. They save some people from a fire accident and Hindu women from being molested by two Muslims. Kiran catches one of the two Muslims and hands over them to police. Later when Kiran enters the mosque where thirty thousand Muslims were taking refuge, one of the assailants recognizes him, and provokes others to kill him. But for the timely protection offered by Abdul, Kiran could have become a scapegoat to the blood- thirstiness of the Muslims. Though Kiran and Abdul belong to the two opposing communities, they work in harmony to establish a world of new values.”

Kiran and Abdul feel indebted to each other, for each become for other a friend in need. 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 was, Kiran took his watch, photograph and papers from his wallet to send to his family in event of Abdul’s death. But Abdul survived and later appreciated Kiran as the sole friend who could have survived and later appreciated Kiran as the 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.

Kiran’s liaison with Margot Medley shows his initiation into sex. Margot is a thin, leggy, well- preserved figure in her mid-thirties. Kiran’s association with her starts at tennis. She provokes him often with her “pair of attractive legs” which play with Kiran’s ankle from under the table at the clubs. But when Kiran attempts to kiss her, She “had stopped him and had playfully plotted on his cheek instead” pre- martial sexual relationship is forced to have a strong influence in the development of the protagonist, Kiran Garud. While the emphasis in the story is on the revenge motive of the husband Bob Medley, in this episode involving an Indian and a British woman, it is on the chastening influence of it on the protagonist.

At Raniwada, Kiran adores Margot’s beauty. This adoration leads to sexual intimacy, and both spend days of wild desire and fulfillment. When the clandestine affect is put an end to they continue it at Calcutta. Not only does she take the initiative but also teaches him what his attitude towards women should be Margot says: “Don’t ever a women you are sorry you kissed her.”

Her advice to him about Bob's sudden appearance also is in the same vein.

Kiran is restless when he observes the situation closely. He finds himself solely responsible and feels guilty when he puts himself in the place of Bob. He is ashamed of himself, and sorry for Bob of whose life he caused the ruin. His affair with Margot had graded him down morally, but the saving grace is his repentance for the sin. He later relates:

“A man could not live without women, true enough, but you had no business to get involved with any particular women. That much you could guard against. No one could afford two mistakes like that in a lifetime; no one was going to mess up his life once again.

It is perhaps not to mess up his life once again that Kiran behaves with a good deal of restraint in his behavior with his beloved Bina Sonal at the critical hour of temptation.

Throughout the novel we find Kiran struggling to find fulfillment both in his duty and his love for Bind, a strikingly good-looking girl working on the radio. Both his duty and love come in conflict with each other till last moment when he wins them both because of his restraints and discipline. Kiran doesn't want to relinquish his career as a restraint and discipline. Kiran doesn't want to relinquish his career as a soldier for the sake of his love. But both the things were important for him. He later feels “as though he had let down both the things he loved above everything: the services and Bina. In spite of all these, Kiran has a sense of human values above and beyond the military laws.

Malgonkar is not simply content with the treatment of enviable personal relationships between the British and Indian officers. The historian in him has taken cognizance of the fact of anti-British attitude on the cultural level soon after the British quitted. This attitude is represented through Kamla Kant with a Cosmopolitan attitude. Their relationship is portrayed entirely through dialogue. While Kiran gratefully acknowledges the beneficial influence of the British training and association, KK finds it a great bane on the cultural life of the Indians. He sees the British ‘get-together’ and their ‘club-dance’ in India as ‘conflicting to the culture he has been nurtured in’. He tells Kiran: “To me no Britisher is all right; they are all bastards”. Earlier he had told him:

“I should have thought we should have stopped all such waggish activities by now, I mean dancing and things, aping the ways of foreigners, I call it. I don't know why, but I have always been averse to our women dancing. To me, it is nothing but a legacy of the British rule and only betrays our slavish past.”

He believes that to teach a woman to dance is to encourage her to be immoral. He is worried about the immorality in society which would increase when anyone holds anyone else's wife in his arm on the dance –floor. That sort of freedom would lead women astray like Mrs. Medley, he thinks. His strong convictions that Indian women shouldn't have the same kind of freedom as the western women seem to have. Also, he is firmly against the canalization of the army officers, and wants the army to be truly nationalized. He doesn't like The English names of roads and buildings in the

cantonment and want them to be named after our own leaders.

Kiran feels deflated by the inflated ideas of K.K. He had not expected that K.K. who strove to create the impression that he spoke English would have such extreme views, we can understand that K.K. is not so much an idealist but a false nationalist brought up in a highly orthodox family like that of his wife. He is proved of her backwardness as if it were a proof of high breeding and respectability. Kiran, on the other hand, has no dislike for western culture. While K.K takes a very offensive step towards the British and a very tolerant attitude towards all that is traditional in India. Kiran strikes a via-media which is the right attitude for a modern Indian to adopt under the circumstances. Their conflicting attitudes and action indicate one level on which the inter-cultural. Theme is treated in the novel, Kiran's confrontation with the British, and its beneficial results for him, indicate the other level.

Malgonkar has portrayed not only the personal and cultural side of British relationships in this novel, but also the political side of it though in a slight degree. S.B. Singh says that the portrayal of the tiff between Col. Manners and Kiran

is "indicative of the fact that even in the rationalism plays an important role". This is erroneous because the tiff is not a very important role." This is erroneous because the tiff is not a question of nationalism, but one of loyalty to the British. What Manners doubts is the loyalty of Indians to the British; what Kiran wants to assert through his boycott is the same loyalty.

Thus, it can be seen that Malgonkar deals with the personal, political and cultural aspects of the historic encounter between the two races. At the personal level, it is one of close friendship resulting in love and friendship for one another. It takes the form of a collision between Indian spiritualism and western pragmatism. There is a graphic representation of the confrontation resulting in the former being challenged and changed by the latter. He portrays it as having merits and defects, but veiled. Malgonkar is often blamed for putting a premium on British at the expenses of the Indians. But the fact is that he is appreciative of good qualities irrespective of colour and race. The defects of imperialism are highly implicit in his novels, and so the treatment of Indo-British relationship in the context of colonial relations become a profile, not a panchromatic affair.

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