

## Review

## Curryfinger

By Chaitanya Kalbag

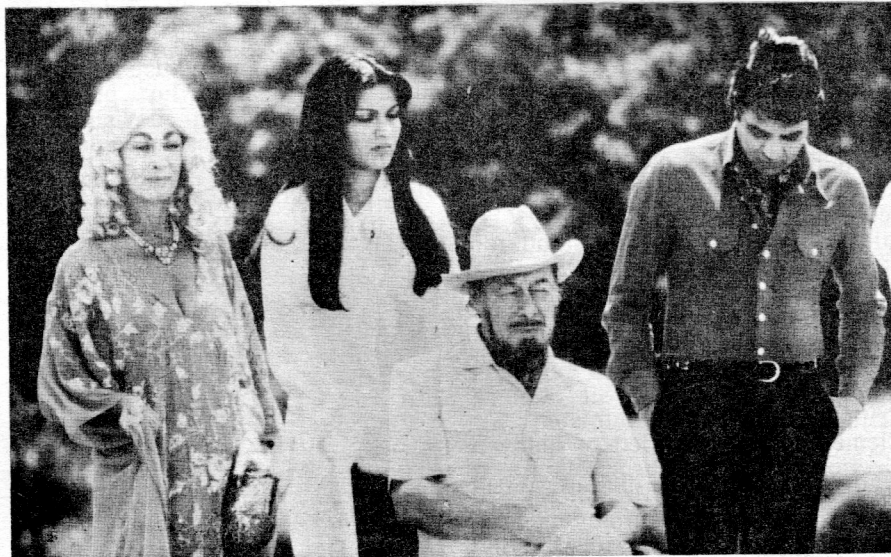
**A** THRILLER is the sort of book that you take to bed with you and then read on through the night, impatient that the pages aren't turning fast enough. The sort of book whose ending you are tempted to read in the beginning just so that the agony of not knowing what happens or whodunit is assuaged. And so when attention is drawn to an Indian thriller one naturally opens it with pleasant anticipation. After the usual romantic mush or placid plotline and tomato-ketchup and glycerine tears stuff that our fiction is made of, the possibility of a John le Carre existing around the corner is immensely exciting.

That sentiment is just what the publishers of *Shalimar*, the novelisation by "one of the ablest living novelists," Manohar Malgonkar, of the screenplay of Krishna Shah's film of the same name, want to pander to. The book, a mere 162 pages, carries on its dust-jacket this plum bit of hyperbole: "Shalimar. More mysterious than Agatha Christie, more sophisticated than Alstair (sic) Maclean, more adventurous and thrilling than James Hadley Chase and Ian Fleming put together."

Perhaps anticipating the reaction such a book would cause, Malgonkar prologues this wham-bang-thank-you-gang amalgam of Dr No and Scaramanga and Al Capone and the Godfather with the explanation that his assignment was "to write a novel based on (Shah's) final screenplay... I have taken absolutely no liberties with the plot, done my best to incorporate the changes made while the film was being shot, and have left most of the dialogue of the screenplay as it was." Now, this is rather like the recent phenomenon of 'anticipatory bail', a hasty *mea culpa* trotted out by a poor cook who disclaims responsibility for the horrid stew he has made merely because his assistant added the salt.

Whether the picturisation of *Shalimar* (which has been made both in English and Hindi, and is an Indo-American production) will succeed at the box-office is another matter. Malgonkar's novelisation is noteworthy only in so far as it resembles an Udipi uthappam touted as being better than the best Italian pizza.

Obviously both screenplay writers (Shah and his American associate Stanford Sharman) and 'noveliser' have been influenced by movies such



The distinctly motley crowd: Sylvia Miles Zeenat Aman, Rex Harrison and Dharmendra

as *The Man with the Golden Gun*, *How to Steal a Million*, and *The Return of the Pink Panther*.

The story is laughingly un-Hitchcockian or Macleanish. The only suspense that might crop up is whether or not the hero gets the prize in the end. Being a screenplay for an essentially Juhu-Bombay film albeit clothed in faded Hollywood kitsch, the hero *has* to get the prize. In this case, the hero is S. S. Kumar, a captain in the army who is asked to leave in disgrace for his drunken, wanton ways. And the prize is the Shalimar, "the largest gem in the world... one thousand two hundred and fourteen point six metric carats", a blood-red ruby that is supposed to have a history beginning with Alexander the Great and ending with the arch-villain of the piece, the panjandrum and master crook 'Sir' John Locksley.

One cannot have such an exotic stone in a dull setting. And so the locale is St Dismas, a tiny isle, "a dot, far... to the north of the Andaman group" and so unclaimed by either Burma or India. Painstakingly, the reader is told it is a private island like Aristotle Onassis' Scorpions (sic).

Never mind how Locksley comes to possess the Shalimar. Ageing,

and suffering from a fake attack of terminal cancer, Locksley invites five of the world's 'crookedest' thieves to St Dismas and challenges them to try and grab the *Shalimar* from his gem room, an octagonal affair with a domed roof, in the centre of which, beneath a transparent bullet-proof dome, lies the ruby.

The five competitors are a distinctly motley crowd: the 'Countess' Rassmusson, an ex-trapeze artis-

te from Denmark; K. P. R. Ayyangar alias Romeo, from Sri Lanka; 'Raja' Bahadur Singh, who meets with a convenient accident so that Kumar can enter the fray disguised as Bahadur Singh Jr; Colonel M. Columbus from America, whose tongue and vocal "cords" have been cut off by a rival Chicago gang; and 'Dr' Dubari, a religious-looking man swathed in robes and skull-cap.

The mirchi-masala is helped along by the presence of Sheila Enders, Locksley's nurse and Kumar's ex-sweetheart and in case that does not establish her credentials, Dr Dubari's goddaughter. Sheila's father who was killed while robbing a bank and Dr Dubari were close friends; hence the connection. To serve Locksley and to guard his gimmicky stronghold are a tribe of bondsmen whom Locksley has rescued from some island near Sumatra and who look upon their master as some sort of god. This part of the story, incidentally, strongly resembles that Paul Robeson movie *Emperor Jones*.

It turns out that Kumar has jilted Sheila and then entered into employment with a gambling and crime syndicate only so that he can establish his 'cover' preparatory to infiltrating into St Dismas. Some

sort of Punjabi Nick Carter, Kumar is, one discovers in the end, a CBI agent assigned to recover Shalimar. And Sheila, heartbroken and bitter after the parting with Kumar in Poona, lands up as a hotel nurse in Delhi, there to meet Locksley and be hired by him, thence to St Dismas and the ultimate reunion with Kumar. Ingenious, what?

Once the setting is established, the action cannot be unpredictable.

the offended gaze of half a dozen burgled books in existence, and from cover to yawn-inducing cover one is assailed by the feeling that the price demanded is overmuch for a work that is basically one of those tuppenny paperback CTs (cheap thrillers) that one could pick up from a pavement distress sale.

The path to *Shalimar* is paved with land mines and electronic booby traps (courtesy Fujitsu) all monitored by Locksley in his den

borate game to see who can get to the ruby, later reveals that he is actually "as sound as a metronome", and that all this has been rigged up only to eliminate all the people who are likely to threaten his possession of Shalimar.

The American influence is evident in the profusion of Yankee slang splattered over the pages: "heel" and "bastard" and "bitch" are, one supposes, essential if one is to spice a story. Locksley plays a mean game of chess and Kumar's opening move is repeatedly described as "Cicilian". The Mafiosos, not to speak of Bobby Fischer, would object violently. The proof-reading appears to have been rushed through as though the 'readers' were in a hurry to get to the damp-squib denouement. And instead of a well-orchestrated rising series of octaves that ought to build up to the crescendo, we have a shrill succession of off-key and jerky incidents that lead up to Locksley's death, Kumar's and Sheila's getaway with the ruby, and Kumar's revelation that he is a CBI agent who has accomplished his task and won back his lost love.

Lest one be charged with being bent on picking holes in a manifestly ragged story, one must remember the claim that *Shalimar* is better than the best stuff produced by the west's thriller-writers. And then it fails to deliver even the second-hand goods. In the ending, we have blatant overtones of Fleming's style. Kumar is telephoning his boss in Delhi to announce that the job is done, while Sheila "flung her arms around him from behind and began to nuzzle his neck". To any 007 fan, that is just like Bond—his moll around his neck, be it Miss Goodnight or Pussy Galore—telling M the same thing.

The very idea of novelising a screenplay in cinema-crazy India is amusing. Would a person reading *Shalimar* rush to see it happen on the screen? Would a person who has seen the film be interested in reading the story? Even the best-selling growls of Gabbar Singh in *Sholay* would appear tame, were they transposed into the pages of a pulp rendition. Just as the Kohinoor reposes in London, the *Shalimar* (which Columbus calls "both Madonna and whore") may well gather dust in a bookshop, forlorn, its "supercharged light" dimming, snowed under by a pile of Christies and Macleans and Chases and Flemings.

*Shalimar* novelisation by Manohar Malgonkar of screenplay by Krishna Shah Vikas Rs 30



Zeenat Aman fits the bill of sweetheart more than nurse

Toss the dramatis personae into a salad bowl, add bloody violence and the cold-bloodedness with which Locksley baits and dispatches his victims Rassmusson, Romeo and Columbus, and the slapdash and forced camaraderie of a group of crooks out to prove which one of them is the greatest, and you can imagine how the book runs. The grammar is far from impeccable, the sub-plots thicken and curdle under

with a panel of television screens and remote-controlled cameras (courtesy Sony). And of course the tribesmen, who serve as guards and slaves, are presided over by Dogro, an English-speaking major-domo. There is a lot of killing: as the story develops the feeling that one is trapped in a badly-organized game of cops 'n' robbers takes hold. Locksley, who pretends to be confined to a wheelchair and arranges the el-