As a teenager, an Abyssinian slave is bought by Wazir Changez Khan, the Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Ahmadrnagar in Deccan. This nobleman of Turkish origin notices the talents of the young African, who becomes not only Head of the Cavalry but also his spiritual son, joining his master’s rebellion against the new forces in motion. The Mughals from Samarkand extend their empire in the north of the country, while the Westerners from Portugal and England, ever greedier, set up trading posts along the coast. Thanks to the master whom he admires, this slave becomes Malik Ambar, a free man who discovers the meaning of life and devotes his life to protecting the Kingdom that has given him his dignity back. However, his rapid rise and nascent relationship with Chand Bibi, the daughter of Sultan Hussein of Ahmadnagar, are not to the taste of everyone in the nobility and earn him much hostility.

**Chand Bibi**

To strengthen ties between the Kingdoms of Deccan in their alliance against the Empire, near Bijapur, Chand Bibi is offered up to the Sultan Ali, despite his greater predilection for teenage boys. The princess is horrified by this injustice, but the fateful day nonetheless arrives. Malik accompanies the procession of the young future bride and, during a stop at a caravanserai, they give in to their burning passion for each other. The following day, the doors of the royal harem of Bijapur close once again.
Malik, devastated, is forced to return to Changez, who has, in the meantime, fallen prey to an ambush from which he never recovers. It is suggested to the dying Wazir that Malik is guilty of this crime. The Abyssinian therefore unexpectedly loses his relationship with the world, just when he finally seemed to have found peace. He flees and wanders the country as a mercenary, where his reputation as an innovative warrior soon precedes him on the peninsula.

Mercenary

For ten years, he sells his services to the highest bidder, weakening the Mughal frontlines and supply routes whenever possible. His invention of guerrilla warfare [’bargigiri’, literally: to take by surprise] makes him master of many a battle field.

In Agra, the Mughal emperor wants to put an end to the insurrections of this region preventing him from uniting Hindustan under his crown. He launches the siege of the Old Fort of Ahmadnagar where the elite of the Kingdom is gathered around Sultana Chand Bibi, who has returned to take over the regency after the assassination of her husband. Malik Ambar runs to her side to try and save the Kingdom that had brought him into the light, in keeping with his promise to Changez Khan, but he is too late. Chand Bibi takes her own life in a bath of acid.

A compromise is reached with the Chief General of the Mogul armies, who spares the people’s lives on the condition that the black warrior takes over the regency of the kingdom, and pledges allegiance to the empire. To avoid plain and simple annexation, Malik accepts this nomination as regent, alongside the sickly and sly blood prince, Murtaza II

Head of State

As head of state, Ambar takes a progressive political line. However, the Portuguese fail to respect the treaties they have signed with the sultanates of Deccan against the empire and burn alive those who refuse to rally behind the Cross. Meanwhile, the English are strengthening their position in the territory thanks to the East India Company. The increasingly demanding Mughals demand that the regent give his daughter’s hand in marriage to the vicious Sultan Murtaza II in order to establish “a blood tie with the land.”

Malik is torn between his desire to develop his kingdom through compromise and his urge to rid the land of all invaders, as he had promised Changez Khan.
William and Sharba

Plunged into deep distress, Malik learns that during the years he spent wandering, Chand gave birth to a child, who she presented officially as the child of a black servant who died in childbirth. Malik discovers his daughter, Sharba, the fruit of their passionate encounter at the caravanserai. This slender teenage girl is the mirror image of her mother and becomes what he holds dearest in the world.

Captivated by Hindustan and its five-thousand-year-old culture, William Shepard, a young English officer from the East India Company who speaks Persian, is appointed alongside the regent in order to establish trade treaties in exchange for English military protection. During a prince’s wedding, William falls under Sharba’s charms. It is love at first sight for both of them and they continue to see each other in secret, constantly.

However, the young sultan, Murtaza II, hates the authoritarian stance of the regent, that “Negro from Barbaria,” and also desires his daughter Sharba. He plots first to get rid of the “capitulator” complying with the Mughals’ orders and next to seize his daughter. Rumours are spread in the mosque about an affair between a young noble Muslim girl and a ‘kafir’ or miscreant. The situation becomes increasingly perilous as a rebellion begins in the country against Ambar. The English refuse to help ‘this tall negro’ and William feels betrayed by his own people. Deccan’s allies, who are being bought off by the empire, also progressively become Malik Ambar’s opponents and he finds himself standing alone.

Meanwhile Sharba falls into the hands of the Sultan’s wife when on her way to a late-night rendez-vous with William. She is handed over by the guards to Murtaza II’s harem. The Sultan’s wife is jealous of the way her husband covets this mixed-race girl and the rumours of a planned wedding, on the Mughals’ instruction, lead her to poison the young girl. The royal couple of Ahmadnagar is then immediately assassinated and Malik Ambar appoints himself Regent King of the Kingdom’s dynasty, alongside a five-year-old puppet King.

He believed that freedom, love, and recognition would fill the emptiness created when he was wrenched away from his parents and enslaved. However, the subsequent deaths of the people he held most dear means that all the political power in the world could not suffice to bring him inner peace. Without his loved ones, he would never have made such a spectacular rise to power, nor would he have opened his heart to the beauty of poetry and nature, which became so essential to him.
At the end of his life, with nothing left to lose, Malik disengaged from his various degrading compromises with the Empire and set off alone to try and free the Kingdom of Ahmadnagar. This came at a price: the great battle of Bathvadi, for Malik what the battle of Marathon was for the Greeks. The exaltation it brought was short-lived however: after Malik’s death, the Mughal empire would go on to absorb his kingdom.

After his death, a rebellion initiated by Shivaji Bhonsle emerged amongst the federate Maratha. They resisted both the Mughals and the English until the 18th century. This famous Hindu hero acknowledged that he was inspired by Malik the Muslim’s actions, dubbing him Malik-el Azam or Malik the celebrated.

Shivaji, a fair-skinned native of Deccan, would become a historical legend. Consequently, Malik Ambar faded almost into oblivion, despite the extraordinary trajectory that saw him overcome his condition, become more Indian than the Indians, and create freedom through tolerance. But he was black and foreign and therein lies the rub.