



Migration, Identity, and Trauma in *A Bend in the Ganges*: Literary Representations of Migrant Experiences

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Abstract— Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) offers a rich literary framework for examining the psychological, ideological, and emotional aspects of migration during India's independence and Partition. Migration is seen as more than just moving—it's a transformative event that reshapes identity, memory, and belonging. The novel's epigraph—"At a bend in the Ganges, they paused to take a look at the land they were leaving"—captures the migrant experience, caught between nostalgia for a fading past and anxiety about an uncertain future. The narrative explores ideological conflicts, communal divides, and psychological displacement through the journeys of its three protagonists—Shafi Usman, Debi-dayal, and Gian Talwar. These characters illustrate how migration, prompted by political upheaval or ideological disillusionment, leaves deep marks on individual and community identities. This analysis compares broader migration discourses, drawing parallels between historical migrations and contemporary digital displacements, where identities are ever more fragmented and virtual belonging becomes precarious. Malgonkar's story extends beyond its historical setting, offering timeless reflections on the pain of uprooting, the quest for identity, and human resilience. Consequently, the novel is a vital precursor to current debates on physical and digital migration, highlighting humanity's persistent desire for agency, connection, and purpose amid relocation.



Keywords— Migration, identity, partition, trauma, ideology.

INTRODUCTION

Migration, in both its literal and symbolic senses, offers a valuable framework for writers to explore the complex layers of identity, trauma, and belonging. More than merely the act of physical movement, migration in literature provides a rich space for examining psychological rupture, emotional negotiations, and ideological conflicts. In Indian English fiction, the Partition of 1947 serves as a poignant backdrop for such exploration, highlighting the profound effects of mass displacement, communal violence, and socio-political fragmentation that accompanied the creation of two nations—effects that still resonate within cultural memory and literary discourse. Among postcolonial novels addressing this intricate period, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) stands out as a compelling story that effectively weaves personal

and political histories. Set against the backdrop of India's fight for independence and the subsequent Partition, the novel moves beyond simple historical recounting. It delves into the inner lives of its characters, illustrating how migration acts as a catalyst for personal change, ideological clashes, and emotional upheaval. J. Lalitha observes:

Written in 1964, Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* is a compelling portrayal of the complex interaction of the ingredients of the freedom movements, which ended in the horrid blood bath and holocaust of the country. (J Lalitha 36)

The epigraph of *A Bend in the Ganges*, "At a bend in the Ganges, they paused to take a look at the land they were leaving" (Malgonkar), beautifully encapsulates the themes of departure and the emotional weight of transition. This symbolic moment at the riverbank signifies not just a

geographical turning point, but also a moral and existential crossroads. The Ganges, steeped in Indian cultural and spiritual significance, serves as a silent witness to the profound changes affecting individuals and the nation as a whole. Through characters like Gian Talwar, Debi-dayal, and Shafi Usman, Malgonkar captures the fragmented ideologies of a divided India. Their varied responses to migration and national unrest illustrate that dislocation is not solely a physical experience; it is also deeply ideological and psychological. Each character undergoes transformations that underscore the fluidity of identity during times of crisis.

A Bend in the Ganges goes beyond being a historical novel; it's a meditation on Partition trauma and the complexities of migration. It shows how memory, violence, and loss are linked to the migrant experience and how characters rebuild fractured identities amid instability. It depicts displacement as a continuum that goes beyond borders, exploring guilt, alienation, and fractured belonging. The novel adds to scholarly discussions on migration and identity in Indian English literature, highlighting how literature preserves historical trauma and resilience.

The 1947 Partition of British India is a pivotal and traumatic chapter in South Asian history. It resulted in the formation of two new countries—India and Pakistan—and initiated one of the largest migrations in human history.

Tens of millions of people had to flee, leaving everything behind; Muslims from India, Hindus and Sikhs from the land that was soon to become Pakistan: two great rivers of humanity flowing in opposite directions along the pitifully inadequate roads and railways, jamming, clashing, colliding head-on, leaving their dead and dying littering the landscape. (Malgonkar 368)

The psychological and emotional effects of the division have been profound, and their influence continues to mould national identities, collective memories, and cultural narratives throughout the subcontinent. In *A Bend in the Ganges*, Manohar Malgonkar presents the Partition not just as a historical context but as a powerful and transformative force that affects every dimension of his characters' lives. The novel effectively captures the tumult of an era marked by betrayal, ideological divisions, and emotional turmoil. Malgonkar portrays migration as more than a mere change of location; it represents a significant existential shift, characterised by the reevaluation of ideals and the complex journey of self-discovery. The trauma of displacement is depicted in a profoundly personal and tangible way, with characters grappling with the profound sense of loss they experience in both material and

ideological aspects. This poignant exploration is beautifully encapsulated in the words of Tekchand, the father of Debi-dayal and Sundari, which highlight the individual struggle amidst this broader narrative.

Damn it! I have to talk about it to somebody... talk or my head will burst. I trusted them and scorned your mother's fears. They are my brothers, I told her. Why did I not listen to her? Because I wanted to keep all this, all that my family and I myself have built. One of the best houses in town, a name honoured in the whole province, the best private collection of Indian bronzes in the whole country. And suddenly someone has decided that this land which is mine should be foreign territory. (Malgonkar 374)

Urvashi Butalia captures the gravity of this rupture succinctly when she writes, "Thousands of families were divided, homes were destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned. Astonishingly, and despite many warnings, the new governments of India and Pakistan were unprepared for the convulsion." (*The Other Side of Silence* 3)

Gian, a devoted follower of Gandhian non-violence, finds it difficult to uphold his ideals as communal tensions grow and violence spreads. His quick and impulsive slip from non-violence leads him to kill Vishnu Dutt with the same axe that Vishnu Dutt used to kill his brother. His moral resolve weakens in the face of brutality, revealing the limits of passive resistance in a more volatile environment. Gian Talwar is portrayed as someone deeply committed to Mahatma Gandhi's principles of ahimsa and satyagraha, emphasising moral resistance and spiritual strength, mirroring India's non-violent independence movement. However, as the story unfolds, Gian's beliefs falter amid political violence. The collapse of law, communal hatred, and betrayal expose the shortcomings of passive resistance in the face of violence. His transformation from an ethical idealist to someone capable of theft and murder highlights an ideological fracture, illustrating how violence and disillusionment can erode personal integrity when survival demands moral compromise. As James Y. Dayananda remarks:

It is during this communal war of August in the Panjab that Gian undergoes a change; he experiences for the first time unselfishness, accepts the world for what it is and emerges a triumphant victor over falseness. From Delhi he rushes to Duriabad on the other side of the border in order to rescue Sundari and her parents, without the slightest regard for his own safety. (James 130)

Gian Talwar views memory as both refuge and burden, haunted by his Gandhian roots, family, and a

morally coherent past. He retreats into memory to cope with present chaos, where memories preserve meaning amid violence and fragmentation. These memories reflect a psychological response to trauma, with nostalgia as a survival strategy and a way to reconstruct the self. Gian's longing for Gandhian ideals challenges the nationalist narrative of progress, highlighting both what was lost and gained. Migration, once part of a collective struggle, now becomes solitary, as characters like Gian, Debi, and Shafi feel estranged from their former ideals.

Gian's eventual disillusionment is particularly emblematic. The dissonance between his early beliefs and later actions—marked by violence, deception, and emotional detachment—illustrates the existential cost of ideological collapse. His story mirrors the psychological fragmentation experienced by countless individuals during Partition. By the novel's end, Gian is no longer a man guided by ideals, but a figure marked by moral exhaustion and loss. His internal struggle underscores the emotional and spiritual cost of trying to make sense of a world shattered by political betrayal and communal brutality.

Debi-dayal embodies militant nationalism, advocating armed resistance through the revolutionary Hanuman Club. This reflects a shift among Indian youth, disillusioned with Gandhian ideals. His suffering in Andaman prison shapes his worldview, leading him to align with Japanese forces before returning to India. His relationship with Mumtaz introduces compassion, prompting him to reconsider his beliefs. His violent death during communal riots contrasts with his innocent love, highlighting the clash between violence and human connection. The story explores his complex character and comments on the human experience amid chaos.

He (Debi-dayal) surrendered himself to the pain, not knowing what she was trying to tell him, but taking a childish, pathetic consolation in the fact that she wanted to be with him wherever he was now going; go with him as she had always wanted to go wherever he went (Malgonkar *A Bend in the Ganges* 410)

Debi-dayal embodies militant nationalism. As the charismatic leader of the Hanuman Club—a youth organisation advocating armed resistance—Debi believes that liberation from colonial rule must be achieved through violence. To him, migration is not merely movement across geography but a symbolic purification from colonial influence and a reassertion of indigenous strength. His glorification of martyrdom and strict adherence to revolutionary ideals clash with Gian's moral ambivalence. Yet, Debi's version of nationalism, rooted in religious and cultural exclusivity, anticipates the sectarian logic that

would later shape Partition. His unwavering ideology ultimately fuels the communal divisions he seeks to overcome, illustrating how absolutist visions of freedom can descend into divisive dogma. Dr. Basavaraj Naikar records:

A Bend in the Ganges, thus, offers us a picture of the anti-colonial struggle in the Indian context. In it Manohar Malgonkar succeeds in tracing the various aspects of the encounter between colonial and anti-colonial forces. Whereas Dewan Bahadur Tekchand is a rich man, who owns the Shipment Company and who represents the pro-British Indian capitalists, his son Debi-dayal is an ardent patriot trying to win freedom for India through his terrorist activities. (Basavaraj Naikar 71)

Shafi, a Muslim patriot, becomes a tragic figure—alienated from both the emerging Muslim identity of Pakistan and the growing Hindu nationalism in India. His predicament stresses the impossibility of belonging in a cracked polity. M. Rajagopalachari observes:

Malgonkar shows the self-consuming nature of violence through Shafi Usman. The death of his innocent father in the Jallianwala Bagh incident turns Shafi onto the violent path, and soon he becomes the most “wanted” revolutionary. (Rajagopalachari 65)

Shafi, although born a Muslim, adopts the appearance of a Sikh, symbolising a deep commitment to the ideals of the freedom movement. As the leader of the Hanuman Physical Club—serving as a cover for revolutionary activities—he unites Hindu and Muslim youth, encouraging them to transcend religious divisions and challenge traditional taboos that divide communities. Through his efforts, Shafi becomes a powerful emblem of secularism and unity. However, his journey is fraught with challenges, and he ultimately faces the consequences of senseless violence. His dramatic demise occurs when Sundari strikes him with a statue of Shiva, a deity that embodies both destruction and transformation. This moment poignantly highlights the complexities of his path, emphasising the need for constructive dialogue and understanding in the face of conflict, and the importance of seeking fulfilment in ways that promote peace and collaboration.

Shafi Usman, a Muslim comrade of Gian and Debi, challenges the polarised national identity debate. A patriot envisioning a united India, his loyalty is questioned as religious divisions deepen. Once a respected revolutionary, he becomes marginalized amid growing community mistrust. Communal anxieties about his religious identity overshadow his dedication to the nation. Shafi represents

the secular Muslim patriot who feels alienated in a landscape that rejects pluralism. His story highlights the vulnerability of minority identities amid rising majoritarianism and nationalist shifts.

Malgonkar's treatment of this period challenges traditional heroism and resistance stories. His characters are flawed individuals caught in historical forces, not idealised freedom fighters. By not romanticising the nationalist movement, Malgonkar reveals its contradictions. Migration tests ideological fragility and moral ambiguity. *A Bend in the Ganges* shows the emotional and ideological dismemberment caused by forced migration and contested nationhood. The Partition acts as a backdrop and catalyst for change, shaping identity, breaking relationships, and creating moral dilemmas. The novel offers a human perspective on a nation torn by violence and fragmentation.

In *A Bend in the Ganges*, Malgonkar crafts characters—Gian Talwar, Debi-dayal, and Shafi Usman—not just as actors in the Partition drama but as archetypes embodying India's responses to colonialism and nationhood. Each character personifies a political philosophy and emotional temperament, showing how ideological beliefs fracture under trauma and upheaval. These characters symbolise identity fragmentation during ideological crises, revealing the breakdown of unity in the nationalist movement due to religion, class, and philosophy. They re-negotiate or give up their identities amid socio-political turmoil. The novel meditates on how ideological conflict during independence and Partition shatters nations and individual identities. Malgonkar humanises political struggle through characters reflecting the broader disintegration of nationalism. Gian, Debi, and Shafi's stories explore loyalty, identity, and belief re-evaluated amid hard choices. The book adds to Partition literature by questioning and reimagining resistance, nationalism, and selfhood. Dr. Jyoti Hooda describes:

Revenge and violence in *A Bend in the Ganges* is profound, shaping the characters and the larger narrative. It highlights the destructive nature of these elements, illustrating how personal vendettas and historical conflicts can lead to lasting scars on individuals and communities. The novel depicts the ripple effects of revenge and violence, portraying the intricate connections between personal choices and societal consequences. (Jyoti Hooda 68)

In *A Bend in the Ganges*, migration is portrayed as a psychological journey influenced by memory, nostalgia, and self-reconstruction. The novel begins with a quote about a land they leave, symbolising a liminal space between departure and

arrival, where identity is caught between past familiarity and future uncertainty. Belonging shifts from geography to personal memory, especially for Gian, whose longing is for a lost homeland and a lost self aligned with Gandhian ideals. Jasbir Jain explains:

Evil and good do not dwell in an external, identifiable world: seeking an enemy outside, whether it be a Vishnudutt, a race, or a caste, is merely an attempt at rationalisation of the duality which exists within. (Jasbir Jain 23)

Memory extends beyond individual nostalgia into a collective trauma of imprisonment, rebellion, and violence, which bonds characters yet is tested by betrayal and disloyalty. Homeland, once a symbol of unity, becomes a landscape of suspicion, leaving belonging rooted in fractured memories. Malgonkar's novel meditates on the emotional aftermath of migration, challenging triumphalist narratives of liberation by highlighting melancholy, displacement, and rootlessness. Gian's journey critiques the psychological toll of Partition, showing that the search for belonging often becomes an act of remembering and reimagining home in memory, shaped by loss and longing.

A Bend in the Ganges reflects India's anti-colonial struggle and Partition trauma, but its themes of displacement, identity, and estrangement remain relevant today amid globalisation, digital technology, and migration. The characters—Gian Talwar, Debi-dayal, and Shafi Usman—are not only geographically displaced but also ideologically and existentially unsettled. As Indian society faces upheaval, it grapples with collapsing values and communal bonds. Gian's journey from Gandhian non-violence to moral confusion symbolises modern existential exile, echoing Vijay Mishra's idea that diasporic subjects feel a haunting sense of loss and exile.

I. CONCLUSION

Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* explores the human experience of displacement beyond the historical context of India's Partition. It examines migration in physical, psychological, and ideological terms through the journeys of Gian Talwar, Debi-dayal, and Shafi Usman, highlighting how migration fractures bonds, erodes beliefs, and shatters identities. Their struggles reflect the moral and emotional chaos of forced displacement as they navigate trauma, loss, and the search for roots. The novel shows that migration trauma goes deep into the psyche and reshapes self-identity. Its themes remain relevant today amid war, climate crises, and technological change, shedding light on

the plight of refugees, digital dislocation, and cultural upheaval.

Malgonkar's story offers insights into humanity's ongoing quest for meaning, dignity, and belonging, making it a timeless exploration of migration and identity. It emphasises the universal feelings of uprootedness, longing for continuity, and reconciliation, serving as a meditation on resilience amid fragmentation. As a powerful literary work, it helps us understand both the emotional toll of Partition and the broader human experience of being unmoored in a changing world.

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