

# Freedom, At What Cost : A Critical Study Of Manohar Malgonkar's A Bend In The Ganges

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## Abstract

Freedom came to India along with violence. The joy of independence was overshadowed by the painful partition of the great land along religious lines as India and Pakistan. In the process, thousands were slaughtered, a great number of women were raped, abducted and mutilated and millions were rendered homeless. Thus, the Partition of India remains a painful, watershed moment in the Indian freedom struggle. The events which led to the partition, the partition itself and its aftermath have captured the imagination of quite a few creative writers. These writers have given faithful and artistic accounts of the partition of the great land of India in their creative works. This has given birth to the genre of 'The Partition Novel.' The present article is a critical study of Manohar Malgonkar's A Bend in the Ganges, based on the Partition theme.

**Keywords:** Partition, freedom, independence, religious, watershed

## I. INTRODUCTION

Many Western writers found it near-impossible to write fiction on holocaust. The sheer enormity of the event disturbed them so much that they found it difficult to recreate the event in the mode of fiction. Similarly, it remained a challenging task for a creative writer to articulate the enormity of the Partition-situation as Srinivasa Iyengar points out the near impossibility to describe the scale of the partition riots: ". . . for the artistic projection of the things that happened in 1947, not even the images of Dante's inferno can possibly prove adequate" (Iyengar, 324-25). The events of Partition shattered the rosy notions of the innate goodness in human beings and a sense of brotherhood. Khushwant Singh testifies: "The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were

shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country. . . I became . . . an angry middle-aged man, who wanted to show his disenchantment with the world. I decided to try my hand at writing" (quoted from Singh's talk).

Manohar Malgonkar was another writer whose critically acclaimed novel *The Bend in the Ganges* probes on the ways how violence erupted in the lives of men and women of the times through the characters—Gian, Debi Dayal and Sundari. This paper focuses on the depiction of partition-riots in the novel.

Manohar Malgonkar is one of the better known Indo-Anglian novelists of the post-Independence period. His output consists of six novels—*Distant Drum* (1960), *Combat of Shadows* (1962), *The Princes* (1963), *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), *The Devil's Wind* (1972) and *Open Season*. He has written three volumes of short stories, *A Toast in Warm Wine* (1974), *Bombay Beware* (1975) and *Rumble - Tumble* (1977). His novels such as *The Princes* and *A Bend in the Ganges*, achieved spectacular success. On the other hand, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar found *Distant Drum*, a novel of “unusual distinction” (IWE). *The Princes* was a Literary Guild Selection, and E.M. Forster considered *A Bend in the Ganges*, one of the three best novels of 1964. Rituparna Roy feels that *A Bend in the Ganges* belongs to the canon of Indian English fiction. Meenakshi Mukherjee opines that

it is a political novel. . . “panoramic in scope and epic in aspiration”(59). This novel was also compared with such classics as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* by Richard Church in his celebrated review of the book in *The Bookman*.

The novels and short stories of Malgonkar mark a reaction against work-a-day social realism; romanticism is their key-note. And yet, curiously enough, they are rooted in authenticity and sound historical sense. As for the historical basis of his novels, they are close enough to pass for straight history. Many aspects of recent Indian history, such as the Princely Order, Independence and the Partition, form the focus of attention in his fiction. His larger concern is with the passing away of old values, the destructive element in human nature, violence and revenge. *A Bend in the Ganges* for this very reason attains universality and epic grandeur.

Indo-Anglian fiction is to a large extent, sociologically motivated. All art -fictional art most noticeably -reflects sociological trends and pressures to a greater or lesser degree. Indo-Anglian fiction which had earlier mirrored the freedom struggle, socio - political unrest and Gandhian reforms in the pre-Independence era came to portray the Partition and its aftermath. The tragedy of partition stirred the fictional

imagination of many Indian writers to creatively explore the various dimensions of the colossal catastrophic event. The partition and its horrendous consequences therefore, find thematic focus in a number of novels like—Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* (1959), Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Bonophul's *Betwixt Dream and Reality* (1961), Padmini Sengupta's *Red Hibiscus* (1962), Manohar Malgonkar's *Distant Drum* and *A Bend in the Ganges*, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975) and H.S. Gill's *Ashes and Petals* (1978). Of these works. *Train to Pakistan*, *A Bend in the Ganges* and *Azadi* have been singled out as representative novels on partition.

Whereas *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi* directly deal with the partition, *A Bend in the Ganges* is “an epic presentation of the whole struggle of the Indian Independence and its aftermath,” and “the anatomy of Partition’ which has been attempted only in the last, bitter phase of the novel, especially in the chapters entitled “*The Anatomy of Partition*, ‘*The Sunrise of Our Freedom*’ and ‘*The Land They Were Leaving*.’ These chapters constitute the climax of the novel towards which all the earlier events of the novel are skillfully manipulated. The divergent strands of the plot are woven together through this climatic focus on the Partition. Gian Talwar, Debi-dayal, Sundari, Shafi Usman, Mumtaz, Tek Chand and his wife—all of them are caught up in the communal holocaust when Independence brings the Partition, and there is a massive exchange of Muslim and Hindu populations. The glory and defeat of the hour of freedom and the shame of Partition emerge as the themes of *A Bend in the Ganges* in the final chapters. That is why it can be described as a partition novel although it is more than a mere partition novel.

In his novel. *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh remains within the obvious limits of socio-cum-political narrative fiction of contemporary interest because of his restricted canvas and limited range, and his novel, therefore, concentrates on the Partition holocaust itself. He depicts the human tragedy caused by the Partition and the attendant

communal disharmony but he does not fully explore the politico-historical background and sociological factors responsible for it except in a few opening paragraphs. Similarly Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* portrays the partition but his emphasis is more on the rehabilitation of the refugees and various other problems faced by them than on the forces which produced it. In sharp contrast to these two novelists, Malgonkar has covered a wider canvas in *A Bend in the Ganges*, and shows the fateful effect of the past on the present. The chief strength of his novel, particularly in regard to the Partition theme, stems from the detailed historical introduction that it provides to the Partition tragedy. The Partition which came as a 'fellow traveler of freedom' was not the outcome of an overnight political decision. It was rather the culmination of a steady process that slowly gathered momentum and exploded with a bang. In this novel Manohar Malgonkar shows how gradually, drop by drop, communal poison embittered the lives of such dedicated freedom fighters as Shafi Usman and Basu and converted them into communal fanatics. The young terrorists who blew up railway tracks, bridges and aeroplanes are ironically at each other's throat at the end of the novel. Malgonkar has explored the issues connected with the Partition rather ironically. 'The Sunrise of our freedom' for which Debi-dayal and Usman worked together, tragically becomes an occasion of their own destruction. The Partition and the method with which it was carried out have caused sheer disgust in the novelist. He shows "Trust with destiny" as "also the death-trap fashioned by the Malignant Time-spirit." Debi Dayal is faced with a number of questions raised by the Partition holocaust. But he does not live to find answers for them because while travelling in a train, he is discovered by Muslim rioters and, despite the passionate protestations of Mumtaz, is dragged out and felled. She hurls herself upon him but she is wrenched apart and carried away naked and struggling, screaming at the top of her voice.

The tragic murder of Debi Dayal and the way Mumtaz is separated from him is a clear indication of the enormity of the evil of the Partition. Thus, while the Partition is the subject

of only the final chapters of *A Bend in the Ganges*, Manohar Malgonkar extensively explores the historical facts of the Partition through an indirect commentary on the slow but steady growth of communalism, the history of the Partition, the background and the mass exodus of often million people accompanied by communal violence as a fellow-traveller of freedom.

Malgonkar views the Partition as the outcome of the suppression of violence in Indian people by Mahatma Gandhi's creed of non-violence. He has portrayed it from a political angle. In the novel, Basu calls his wife and shows her face to Debi Dayal, which was burnt with sulphuric acid filled in an electric bulb, the standard weapon of Hindu-Muslim feud in those days. Basu's wife is symbolic of what has happened to the face of India. In view of Muslim fanaticism, Basu has joined Hindu Mahasabha. Much later, while travelling in the refugee train with Mumtaz, Debi Dayal is stunned by the horrors of Partition.

The ending of *A Bend in the Ganges*, recalls the conclusion of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, where the affirmation is even more deliberate and emphatic. The piercing cry of Mumtaz is indeed the cry of outraged humanity. The incidents of mass murder, carnage, abduction of women, rape, mutilation of breast, cutting of penis and other examples of cruelty and horror as recorded in many factual accounts of the Partition such as *Cruel Interlude* and *Freedom at Midnight* basically correspond to those presented in the three novels.

As a partition novel, *A Bend in the Ganges* is, thus, marked by both strength and weaknesses. Unlike other partition novels, it gives a detail historical introduction to the partition. It, however, does not reveal the kind of objectivity, although it has plenty of detachment, which *Train to Pakistan* has. *Train to Pakistan* shows how Jugga and Nooran are separated from each other; *A Bend in the Ganges* presents Debi and Mumtaz who are finally separated in the holocaust of Partition. Thus, these novels have an almost similar situation which views the partition as a human tragedy separating two passionate lovers. S.C. Harrex says of *Train to*

Pakistan that "the perspectives of meaning are forcefully implicit in the dramatic action." This observation is equally true of *A Bend in the Ganges* in which love represents one of the positive and humanistic forces. The way in which Debi Dayal is ruthlessly separated from Muntaz is a clear proof of the evil that is epitomized in the partition fury. As a Partition novel, *A Bend in the Ganges* succeeds in the delineation of the complex factors which led to the colossal disaster.

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