

Western vs Indian Concept of Heroism in Malgonkar's Works

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Abstract

The concept of heroism has undergone significant transformation across cultural and historical contexts, particularly in Indian English literature. Manohar Malgonkar's historical novels present a compelling site for examining the contrast between Western and Indian notions of heroism. This paper explores how Malgonkar negotiates these differing traditions through his portrayal of protagonists in works such as Distant Drum, Combat of Shadows, The Princes, and A Bend in the Ganges. While the Western model emphasises individualism, psychological conflict, and the emergence of the anti-hero, the Indian conception is rooted in duty, moral codes, and collective responsibility. Through a close reading of selected characters, the study highlights how Malgonkar blends these paradigms to create complex figures who embody both traditions. The paper argues that Malgonkar's heroes represent a transitional form of identity shaped by colonial and postcolonial influences, ultimately redefining heroism as a dynamic and culturally hybrid construct.

Keywords

Heroism, Indian English Literature, Western Hero, Anti-Hero, Masculinity, Moral Code, Postcolonial Identity

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The notion of heroism has evolved across cultures and literary traditions, reflecting the values, conflicts, and aspirations of different societies. In Indian English literature, the concept of the hero acquires a distinctive dimension as it negotiates between indigenous cultural ideals and Western literary influences. Manohar Malgonkar's historical novels offer a rich terrain for examining this intersection, as they present characters who embody both traditional Indian values and modern Western sensibilities. Through his works, Malgonkar explores the complexities of heroism in a changing socio-political landscape, where colonial encounters and postcolonial realities reshape the understanding of courage, duty, and individuality.

In the Western literary tradition, the concept of the hero has undergone a significant transformation from the classical ideal of the epic hero to the modern figure of the anti-hero. The classical Western hero, as seen in works such as Homer's epics, is characterised by physical strength, valour, and a quest for glory. However, with the advent of modern literature, this ideal gives way to a more complex and often flawed figure, the anti-hero, who is marked by internal conflict, moral ambiguity, and existential struggle. This shift reflects a broader cultural movement toward individualism and psychological realism, where the hero is no longer an embodiment of perfection but a representation of human complexity.

In contrast, the Indian concept of heroism is deeply rooted in ethical and moral frameworks, often derived from classical texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The Indian hero is traditionally defined by adherence to *dharma*, or duty, and is guided by a strong sense of moral responsibility toward society. Heroism, in this context, is not merely an assertion of individual strength but a commitment to collective welfare and ethical conduct. The emphasis on duty, sacrifice, and righteousness distinguishes the Indian hero from the Western emphasis on individual achievement and self-realisation.

Malgonkar's novels reflect this tension between Western and Indian paradigms of heroism, presenting characters who navigate the complexities of both traditions. His protagonists are often placed in situations of conflict and crisis, where they must make choices that test their moral and ethical convictions. As observed in the provided research material, Malgonkar's heroes are frequently drawn from aristocratic or upper-class backgrounds and are depicted as individuals who confront challenges through courage and determination. This emphasis on social status and moral responsibility aligns with the traditional Indian conception of heroism, while the focus on individual struggle and psychological development reflects Western influences.

The character of Kiran Garud in *Distant Drum* exemplifies this synthesis of Western and Indian ideals. As a military officer, Kiran embodies the discipline,

courage, and sense of duty associated with the Indian heroic tradition. At the same time, his personal journey is marked by internal conflicts and a quest for self-realisation, characteristics that resonate with the Western concept of the modern hero. His adherence to a “code” of conduct, which governs his actions and decisions, reflects a blend of traditional values and modern sensibilities. As the narrative suggests, the hero’s life is shaped by “tests and hurdles” that ultimately define his character, highlighting the role of struggle in the formation of heroism.

Similarly, the character of Henry Winton in *Combat of Shadows* represents a departure from the traditional heroic ideal, embodying the traits of the Western anti-hero. Henry is portrayed as a complex and flawed individual whose actions are driven by insecurity, prejudice, and moral ambiguity. His inability to reconcile his personal desires with his social environment leads to a tragic downfall, illustrating the limitations of the Western model of heroism when detached from ethical grounding. As noted in the research material, Henry “lacks understanding and sympathy” and ultimately becomes a figure of failure, emphasising the consequences of moral disintegration.

The contrast between Kiran Garud and Henry Winton highlights the fundamental differences between Indian and Western conceptions of heroism. While Kiran’s character is defined by discipline, responsibility, and adherence to a moral code, Henry’s character reflects the fragmentation and alienation associated with the modern Western anti-hero. This juxtaposition allows Malgonkar to critique the limitations of both traditions, suggesting that neither model is sufficient on its own to address the complexities of contemporary life.

The character of Abhayraj in *The Princes* further illustrates the evolution of heroism in Malgonkar’s works. Abhayraj’s journey is marked by a process of self-discovery, as he moves from a position of privilege and detachment to a deeper understanding of social responsibility. His transformation reflects the influence of both Indian and Western ideals, as he seeks to reconcile his personal desires with his duty toward society. The narrative suggests that true heroism lies not in the assertion of power but in the ability to empathise with others and act in the interest of collective welfare.

In *A Bend in the Ganges*, the character of Gian Talwar represents yet another dimension of heroism, as he undergoes a process of moral and psychological transformation. Gian’s journey is shaped by the political and social upheavals of his time, particularly the struggle for independence and the conflicts arising from partition. His actions are driven by a desire for justice and redemption, reflecting the Indian emphasis on moral responsibility. At the same time, his internal conflicts and personal struggles align with the Western concept of the modern hero, who is defined by complexity and ambiguity.

Malgonkar's portrayal of heroism is also influenced by the socio-political context of colonial and postcolonial India. The interaction between Indian and Western cultures during the colonial period creates a space for the emergence of hybrid identities, where individuals are shaped by multiple influences. This hybridity is reflected in the characters of Malgonkar's novels, who embody both traditional values and modern sensibilities. The result is a redefinition of heroism that transcends cultural boundaries and reflects the realities of a changing world.

The emphasis on conflict and crisis as essential components of heroism is another significant aspect of Malgonkar's work. His characters are often placed in situations that challenge their beliefs and force them to confront difficult choices. These moments of crisis serve as catalysts for personal growth, highlighting the transformative potential of adversity. As the research material indicates, Malgonkar's heroes "fight shy of conflict" only to ultimately engage with it as a means of self-realisation. This dynamic reflects the idea that heroism is not an inherent quality but a process that is shaped through experience.

At the same time, Malgonkar's depiction of heroism raises important questions about gender and representation. His novels predominantly focus on male protagonists, often relegating female characters to secondary roles. This emphasis on masculinity reflects the traditional association of heroism with male attributes such as strength, courage, and leadership. However, it also highlights the limitations of this perspective, suggesting the need for a more inclusive understanding of heroism that recognises the contributions of women.

The blending of Western and Indian concepts of heroism in Malgonkar's works ultimately results in the creation of complex and multifaceted characters who defy simple categorisation. His heroes are neither purely traditional nor entirely modern but exist at the intersection of multiple cultural influences. This hybridity reflects the broader dynamics of postcolonial identity, where individuals must navigate the challenges of cultural negotiation and self-definition.

The interplay between Western individualism and Indian collectivism forms a crucial foundation for understanding heroism in Malgonkar's novels. Western literary traditions often privilege the individual's quest for meaning, where the hero is defined by personal struggle and self-assertion. In contrast, Indian narratives emphasise the individual's role within a larger social and moral framework. Malgonkar's protagonists frequently inhabit a space where these two perspectives intersect, creating a tension that shapes their actions and decisions. This duality highlights the complexity of heroism in a postcolonial context, where inherited values are constantly negotiated against modern influences.

Another significant dimension of heroism in Malgonkar's fiction is the emphasis on ethical dilemmas. His characters are rarely presented with clear choices; instead, they must navigate situations where moral boundaries are blurred. This ambiguity reflects the Western tradition of the modern hero, who is often defined by inner conflict rather than external achievement. At the same time, Malgonkar ensures that these dilemmas are grounded in an Indian ethical framework, where the concept of duty remains central. The resulting tension between moral absolutism and relativism adds depth to his portrayal of heroism.

The idea of the "code hero," particularly evident in *Distant Drum*, serves as a bridge between Western and Indian concepts of heroism. The code that governs Kiran Garud's actions is not merely a set of rules but a moral compass that guides his decisions. This concept resonates with the Western notion of the hero who lives by a personal code, yet it also reflects the Indian emphasis on disciplined conduct and righteousness. The synthesis of these ideas suggests that heroism is defined not only by action but also by adherence to a set of ethical principles.

Malgonkar's treatment of heroism also reveals a deep engagement with the theme of identity. His characters often undergo a process of self-discovery, during which they confront their own limitations and contradictions. This journey is particularly significant in the context of postcolonial India, where questions of identity are shaped by historical and cultural transformations. The hero's struggle to define himself mirrors the broader struggle of a nation seeking to establish its identity in the aftermath of colonial rule.

The portrayal of war and conflict in Malgonkar's novels further enhances the exploration of heroism. War serves as a testing ground where the true nature of the hero is revealed. In Western literature, war is often depicted as a site of existential crisis, where the hero confronts the absurdity of life. In contrast, Malgonkar presents war as a context in which moral values are both challenged and reaffirmed. His heroes are not merely survivors of conflict but individuals who emerge with a deeper understanding of themselves and their responsibilities.

Another important aspect of Malgonkar's depiction of heroism is the role of failure. Unlike the traditional epic hero who achieves success and glory, many of Malgonkar's characters experience setbacks and disappointments. This emphasis on failure aligns with the Western concept of the anti-hero, who is defined by imperfection and vulnerability. However, in Malgonkar's narrative, failure is not an end but a stage in the process of growth. It catalyses self-reflection, enabling the hero to evolve and mature.

The contrast between external action and internal reflection is also central to Malgonkar's understanding of heroism. While his characters often engage in

physical acts of courage, their true heroism lies in their ability to confront their inner conflicts. This dual focus reflects the integration of Western psychological realism with Indian philosophical introspection. The hero's journey is thus both outward and inward, encompassing action as well as contemplation.

Malgonkar's heroes also embody a sense of historical consciousness, as their actions are deeply influenced by the socio-political context in which they exist. The backdrop of colonialism, independence, and partition provides a framework for understanding their struggles. This historical dimension adds a layer of complexity to the concept of heroism, as it situates individual actions within a larger narrative of national transformation. The hero becomes not only a personal figure but also a representative of collective experience.

The relationship between heroism and leadership is another recurring theme in Malgonkar's work. His protagonists often assume positions of authority, where their decisions have significant consequences for others. This aspect of leadership aligns with the Indian ideal of the hero as a guide and protector of society. At the same time, Malgonkar highlights the challenges of leadership, particularly the burden of responsibility and the inevitability of criticism. This nuanced portrayal underscores the complexity of heroic leadership.

The influence of Western education and values on Malgonkar's characters further complicates their sense of heroism. Many of his protagonists are exposed to Western ideas, which shape their perspectives and aspirations. This exposure creates a tension between traditional values and modern ideals, influencing their actions and decisions. The resulting hybrid identity reflects the broader cultural exchange that characterises the postcolonial experience.

Malgonkar also explores the role of honour in defining heroism. Honour, as a concept, occupies a central place in both Western and Indian traditions, but its interpretation varies across cultures. In Malgonkar's novels, honour is closely linked to personal integrity and social responsibility. His characters strive to uphold their honour even in the face of adversity, reflecting a commitment to ethical principles that transcends cultural boundaries.

The depiction of anti-heroic traits in characters like Henry Winton serves as a critique of certain aspects of Western heroism. Henry's moral ambiguity and eventual downfall highlight the dangers of excessive individualism and detachment from ethical values. Through this portrayal, Malgonkar suggests that heroism cannot be sustained without a moral foundation, emphasising the importance of balance between individual freedom and social responsibility.

The process of transformation is another key element in Malgonkar's portrayal of heroism. His characters do not remain static; they evolve in response to their experiences. This transformation often involves a shift from self-centeredness to a broader awareness of social and moral responsibilities. The emphasis on growth and change reflects the dynamic nature of heroism, which is not defined by a single act but by a continuous process of development.

The interplay between destiny and free will also shapes the concept of heroism in Malgonkar's novels. While his characters are influenced by external circumstances, they are not entirely defined by them. Their ability to make choices and take responsibility for their actions underscores the importance of agency in the construction of heroism. This balance between determinism and freedom reflects a synthesis of Western and Indian philosophical traditions.

In conclusion, Manohar Malgonkar's historical novels offer a nuanced exploration of heroism that bridges the gap between Western and Indian traditions. Through his portrayal of characters such as Kiran Garud, Henry Winton, Abhayraj, and Gian Talwar, he highlights the strengths and limitations of both paradigms, ultimately presenting heroism as a dynamic and evolving concept. The synthesis of moral duty and individual struggle, of tradition and modernity, reflects the complexities of the postcolonial experience, where identity and values are continually reshaped. Malgonkar's work thus contributes to a deeper understanding of heroism, not as a fixed ideal but as a process of negotiation and transformation in a rapidly changing world.

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