
Personal Trauma against the Backdrop of Partition: A Study of Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three Banks*

¹**Ankur Chawla**

Research Scholar, Government J Yoganandam Chhattisgarh College, Raipur, C.G.

²**Dr Shashank Gupta**

Supervisor, Government J Yoganandam Chhattisgarh College, Raipur, C.G.

Article Received: 12/02/2026**Article Accepted:** 13/03/2026**Published Online:** 14/03/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.03.170

Abstract:

The Partition of India in 1947 stands as one of the most devastating events in modern history, not merely because it redrew political boundaries, but because it fractured human lives at the most intimate level. While the creation of India and Pakistan marked the end of colonial rule, it simultaneously unleashed unprecedented violence, displacement and psychological devastation. The trauma of Partition was not confined to mass migration or communal riots; it seeped into personal relationships, moral values, gendered experiences and individual identities. Literature emerging from this historical event has played a crucial role in articulating the silenced pain and enduring scars borne by survivors. Through memory, testimony and imaginative reconstruction, such narratives preserve first-hand experiences, challenge official histories and ensure that the human cost of Partition remains visible across generations and cultural boundaries.

Key Words: Devastating, Boundaries, Fractured, Violence, Scars**Introduction:**

Shiv K. Kumar's novel *A River with Three Banks* is a significant contribution to Partition literature, offering a deeply human perspective on communal violence, displacement and what Dar calls "mental anguish" (1567). By blending historical reality with fictional narrative, Shiv K. Kumar explores how Partition was not simply a political event but a catastrophic human tragedy that shattered emotional, cultural and psychological continuity. *A River with Three Banks* describes personal trauma against the broader canvas of Partition which, as Urvashi Butalia observes, "rendered many thousands of women alone" (111). The principal figures embody fragmented inner worlds and represent a range of

contrasting belief systems. The novel focuses on displacement, communal hatred, gendered violence, moral collapse and the fragile possibility of reconciliation. The river, marked by its “three banks,” emerges as a compelling symbol. It shows how layered pasts and diverse identities can exist side by side, though separated by borders. Shiv K. Kumar presents a deeply agonizing portrayal of the human suffering caused by the violence that occurred at the time of India’s Partition. The novel examines the devastating impact of communal hatred through Abdul Rahim’s desperate search for his missing daughter and his brutal murder; Haseena’s exploitation which symbolizes the trauma endured by thousands of abducted young women during communal violence; the forced displacement of Haseena’s mother and sister to Pakistan; and the large-scale exodus of Muslims to Pakistan.

Partition as a Human and Psychological Catastrophe:

The division of India in 1947 was accompanied by widespread brutality, communal riots and forced migration on a scale unparalleled in history. The subcontinent witnessed horrific massacres, arson, abductions and sexual violence, leaving behind enduring psychological wounds. Millions were compelled to abandon ancestral homes and migrate across newly drawn borders solely based on religious identity. Hindus and Sikhs fled from regions that became Pakistan, while Muslims migrated from India to the newly formed Islamic state. Beyond physical suffering, Partition inflicted deep emotional trauma. As Urvashi Butalia observes, the Partition was a “division of hearts” (8). Families were torn apart, communities that had coexisted for centuries disintegrated overnight and individuals were stripped of their sense of belonging. Women, in particular, bore the heaviest burden of violence. Sexual assault, abduction and mutilation were deployed as tools of communal revenge. As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin document: “The range of sexual violence...stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing foetuses...is socking” (43). These acts were not isolated crimes but systematic assaults on the dignity and identity of women, marking Partition as a profoundly gendered catastrophe.

The catastrophe of Partition also produced a long silence in many families and communities. Survivors often found it difficult to speak about the horrors they had witnessed and painful memories remained buried for years. As a result, much of the suffering associated with Partition remained absent from official histories which largely focused on political negotiations and national independence. However, authors and scholars have attempted to recover these hidden experiences through personal narratives, oral histories and literary works. Literature in particular has played an important role in giving voice to the pain, displacement and emotional struggles of ordinary people, especially women whose stories were frequently ignored in traditional historical accounts.

Shiv K. Kumar’s Literary Vision and Historical Reimagining:

Shiv K. Kumar, a distinguished Sahitya Akademi Award recipient, approaches Partition with remarkable sensitivity and narrative depth. In *A River with Three Banks*, he reconstructs the emotional landscape of the 1940s, capturing both human brutality and fleeting moments of compassion. Sooraj Kumar and Seema Rajan aptly describe the novel as a “conscientious revisualizations of the India of the 1940’s, of human brutality and romance and the human agony and ecstasy” (2236).

Set primarily in Delhi and Allahabad, the novel intertwines personal stories with historical chaos. In the novel, Shiv K. Kumar highlights the Muslim experience of displacement, offering a counter-narrative that challenges monolithic interpretations of victimhood. His portrayal emphasizes that suffering during Partition transcended religious boundaries and that trauma was a shared human condition. The novel opens with a “spell of arson, rape and massacre” (1), and an atmosphere of unresolved tension and revenge that lingers after Partition. The novelist depicts how violence became cyclical, with each atrocity triggering retaliatory brutality. The murder of a Muslim, named Abdul Rahim, by Hindu extremists reflects how religious identity itself became a death sentence. Such killings symbolize the targeted nature of communal violence where individuals were reduced to markers of faith rather than recognized as human beings. The killing of Abdul Rahim exemplifies this dehumanization. Identified solely by his beard, he becomes a victim of blind vengeance. His murder exposes how communal hatred erased individuality and transformed ordinary citizens into perpetrators driven by fear and mob mentality. Abdul Rahim stands in for countless unnamed victims whose lives were extinguished simply because they belonged to the “other” community.

Displacement and the Trauma of Repeated Uprooting:

Partition-induced migration emerges as a recurring trauma in the novel *A River with Three Banks*. Gautam Mehta’s parents, who migrate from Lahore to Delhi, carry the psychological burden of displacement. Their arrival is described as the aftermath of “many harrowing experiences on the way from Lahore” (4). When Sarita refuses to live with them, Gautam’s mother refers to this renewed dislocation as their “second Partition.” This metaphor underscores Shiv K. Kumar’s central argument i.e. Partition was not a singular historical event but an ongoing emotional rupture. The trauma of uprooting did not end with physical relocation; it continued through social alienation, emotional loss and fractured family relationships.

In *A River with Three Banks*, Gautam Mehta’s personal turmoil mirrors the fractured national identity of post-Partition India. Just as the nation reconfigured its identity for political survival, individuals were compelled to alter religious and social affiliations for personal survival. As In *Colonial Shadows*, Dr P. Prasantham observes “the loss of cultural

roots often lead to fractured identities” (107). Gautam’s fractured domestic life becomes an allegory for a divided nation struggling to redefine itself. His emotional confusion, moral dilemmas and sense of displacement echo the broader chaos engulfing society.

Gendered Violence and the Abduction of Women:

One of the most disturbing aspects of Partition depicted in the novel is the systematic targeting of women. The abduction of Haseena exemplifies the vulnerability of women during communal violence. She is abducted when she “was whisked away from the college gate by some masked men” (80). Women’s bodies became battlegrounds for communal revenge. Sexual violence was inflicted to dishonour rival communities. The agony of such experiences is voiced by the Sikh tanga driver: “My family had the worst of it...Two of my sisters were carried away...Oh, those blasted Muslims” (14). Such testimonies reveal how women were reduced to symbols of communal honour, their suffering instrumentalized in the politics of hatred.

Shiv K. Kumar presents a scathing critique of religious institutions during Partition. Despite their teachings of peace, religion failed to protect human life or women’s dignity. Gautam is deeply disturbed by this moral collapse. Haseena’s imprisonment in a brothel under the name “Kaleema” exposes how ethical and spiritual values disintegrated in the face of violence. The alliance between Pannalal and Suleiman further exposes the hypocrisy of communal divisions. This fact is revealed by the police commissioner’s remark who says: “Here is a real intercommunal home, with Pannalal and Sulieman Gani as its heads” (181). It shows how economic interests easily transcended religious hatred, exposing the artificiality of communal antagonism.

Against the overwhelming darkness, Gautam’s rescue of Haseena emerges as a rare act of humanity. Risking his life, he liberates her from exploitation, symbolizing resistance against systemic violence. Their perilous escape, punctuated by moments of terror; “Is there any Muslim couple in that coupe?” (100) highlights the precariousness of survival during Partition. Gautam’s killing of Pannalal functions as a symbolic act of defiance against the exploitation of women.

Mass Migration and Collective Trauma:

Mass migration during the Partition was not merely a physical relocation of people but a profound psychological split that left lasting scars on individual and collective consciousness. The forced displacement of millions of people across newly drawn borders resulted in the loss of homes, livelihoods, social networks and cultural continuity. Such displacement generated a shared sense of grief, fear and uncertainty, giving rise to what can be understood as collective trauma. Experiences of violence, separation, and humiliation during migration disrupted the sense of belonging and safety, making exile a permanent

emotional condition. In *A River with Three Banks*, the vivid portrayal of refugee camps and railway platforms reveals the brutality people underwent, including scenes of “men with amputated bodies...and young women [with chopped] breasts” (99). The trauma of these mutilated bodies reflects not only physical pain but lifelong social stigma. The murder of a young Muslim couple at the platform demonstrates how suffering leads further violence, perpetuating cycles of hatred.

Conclusion:

A River with Three Banks presents Partition as a deeply personal and psychological tragedy rather than a mere historical event. Through vivid characterization and unflinching realism, Shiv K. Kumar exposes the human cost of communal hatred, gendered violence and forced displacement. The novel underscores that Partition shattered not only land but minds, relationships and moral values. Yet, through the bond between Gautam and Haseena, Shiv K. Kumar affirms the enduring possibility of reconciliation, reminding that love and compassion remain the most powerful antidotes to hatred.

References:

- Khosla, G. D. *Stern reckoning*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. P.3.
- Kumar, Shiv K. *A River with Three Banks*, New Delhi: UBS Publishers’ Distributors Ltd., 1998.
- Kumar, Sooraj and Seema Rajan S. *Unity to Rupture*. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, Vol. 4, July-December 2023, pp. 2235–2239
- Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
- Amutha, L. “A Study of Environmental Psychology: Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude.” *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2026, pp. 439–445.
- More, D. R. *India and Pakistan Fell Apart*. Jaipur: Shruti Publications, 2004.
- Mosley, Leonard. *The Last Days of the British Raj*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1961.
- Prasantham, Dr P. “Colonial Shadows: Navigating Trauma, Displacement and Resistance.” *IRE Journals*, vol. 9, no. 3, Sept. 2025, pp. 101-09.