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Historical Trauma through Literary Perspective Depicted in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*

N. Gunasekaran and V. Peruvalluthi, Ph.D.



Abstract

Chaman Nahal is one of the outstanding novelists of the 1970's. He wrote eight novels. *Azadi* is one of the four novels which constitute the Gandhi Quartet (Gandhian Ideology). It is a modern classic which presents a comprehensive vision of life demonstrating the havoc that partition played on the people of the country both at the social and individual levels. It depicts the realistic historical record of the horrible incidents caused by the partition through literary perspective.

It deals with the theme of partition of Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. As Chaman Nahal himself was a refugee, he writes with remarkable penetration and realism.

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The novel is historical, political, and above all, a great work of art. It is divided into three parts, 'Lull', 'Storm' and 'Aftermath' which make it clear that the novel is about the silent atmosphere before the announcement of Partition, the horrible incidents caused by the partition and the pitiable conditions of the uprooted refugees after the Partition. The novelist, Nahal has used the seven families of a Muslim-dominated city Sialkot to represent thousands of sufferers like them. Nahal himself was one of those refugees who were compelled to leave Sialkot for India. So, he wrote what he had observed. Almost at the end of the novel this fact had been cleared by him.

The Theme of Partition



Chaman Nahal

Chaman Nahal, one of the outstanding novelists of the seventies (1970's), worked as a professor of English at Delhi University. He wrote eight novels. *Azadi* (1975) is one of the four novels which constitute the Gandhi Quartet, to which is added the Epilogue (1993) which serves as the Epilogue to the whole Quartet and which won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1977. It deals with the theme of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. As Chaman Nahal himself was a refugee, he writes with remarkable penetration and realism. The novel is historical, political, and above all, a great work of art.

Tragic Effects of the Partition as the Focus

Nahal has presented life-like picture of the period of the Partition. However, the remarkable feature of the narration is the tragic effects of the Partition. We certainly feel horrified when we read about the murders, massacre, rapes, burning, looting and the condition of uprooted refugees caused by the Partition.

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In this regard, K R. Srinivasa Iyengar says: "*Azadi* is about the partition of India that held the subcontinent in a nightmare of horror for months and left a trail of phenomenal bitterness and misery. Even at this distance of time, the wounds bleed afresh at the prod of memory". The division of the novel into three parts 'Lull', "Storm" and "Aftermath" makes it clear that the novel is about the silent atmosphere before the announcement of the Partition, the horrible incidents caused by the Partition and the pitiable conditions of the uprooted refugees after the Partition. Nahal has used the seven families of a Muslim-dominated city Sialkot to represent thousands of sufferers like them.

Dual Attitudes

In *Azadi* Chaman Nahal, through his protagonist, Lala Kanshi Ram also expresses his idea of partition and the British role. Lala Kanshi Ram has dual attitudes towards the British. He admires them for their qualities but criticizes them for their faults. For example, he praises the British Rule for bringing safety and peace to his country but, deeper down, he also admired the British. In any case he enjoyed the safety of British Raj and hugged it lovingly. The British had brought some kind of peace to his land that was torn apart. Lala Kanshi Ram praises the power of the British. He says: "They are a nation which cannot be easily beaten, he thought. A handful of them have kept us under their feet for over two hundred years and now that Hitler too has met the same fate at their hands." An absolutely invincible race!

Lala Kanshi Ram also praised the controlling power of the British rule and police officers. For example, he had great faith in General Ress. But, just before leaving his home, Lala Kanshi Ram blames the British for not protecting the refugees. He also blames the faults of the British. "If the British were going to lose India, it was not because of Gandhi or the awakening amongst the masses, it was because of the tactical error they made in sending out an ugly Viceroy in the crucial days of their Raj."

Widespread and Mutual Killings

Lala Kanshi Ram is an ardent follower of Gandhi's principle of non-violence. He is a grain merchant in Sialkot, now in Pakistan. The time in the novel is 1947 just on the eve of Indian freedom when migration of people from both sides of this country starts taking place.

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Hindu families are brought to a newly set up refugee camp for security reasons and are guarded by the military. Kanshi Ram Lala comes to know that Muslims have killed his only daughter, Madhu. After a couple of days in that camp, all Hindus start leaving Sialkot for the Indian side. News of killing of Muslims by Hindus on the other side of the Pakistani border spreads like wild fire and disturbs the communal relationship.

Transforming into a Universal Man

When this traumatized foot convoy reaches the Indian side, they all are thunderstruck and dumb found. In spite of all these ghastly experiences in their horrible journey from Sialkot to the other side of the border, Kanshi Ram Lala emerges as one who transcends himself from the level of an individual to a universal man.

Chaman Nahal expresses one of his memories, which was about his meeting with Gandhi. He wrote:

"I had been personally exposed to Gandhiji during the last few months of his life. After 1947, he made Birla House in New Delhi his home. Our family by then had migrated from Pakistan to Delhi. And it was possible for me to attend Gandhi's prayer meetings on most evenings. And what caught my eyes was the immense humility of the man. Many of us amongst his listeners were angry young men who had lost everything in Pakistan including the dear ones who were assassinated in the riots. And, we asked Gandhi angry questions, to which he never gave an answer without making us feel that our pain was his pain too. I also saw how plain and ordinary Gandhi was to look at short-statured, thin, with rather common features."

A Political Novel

This shows that the novelist was not happy with the Partition of India and he poignantly expressed the feelings of anguish and anger about it in *Azadi* which is predominantly a political novel. For example, Lala Kanshi Ram, the protagonist, is against the Partition. He, like many others, does not wish the subcontinent to be divided into two nations. He has great faith in Gandhi who would oppose Partition. But the Partition is announced, Lala Kanshi Ram becomes both angry and sad. He blames the English, as saying:

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"Yes, they (the British) are the real villains, they had let the country down, they had let him down, he who put such faith in them".

Aftermath of Partition

There was peace and cheerful life existing before Partition. It is known that India is a democratic country with different communities and religions living together without much conflict. This has been shaped in the society of India by the general consensus that no religion attacks another. Muslims are free to live according to their own rules and regulations and Hindus and Sikhs are free to live following their own religions.

Sialkot, before the beginning of political agitations for the Partition of the subcontinent, was a Muslim dominated city. Yet, there was unity among people of all castes. There was seldom any rivalry between Hindus and Muslims. This fact is presented through the friendship of Lala Kanshi Ram and Chaudhari Barkat Ali and the love of Arun and Nur. Lala Kanshi Ram and Chaudhari Barkat Ali were not only friends but were just like brothers. Both the families heard each other's happiness and sorrow. Influenced by Gandhi's speech, Chaudhari Barkat Ali says to Lala Kanshi Ram:

"You are my brother from today".

The author adds:

"Lala Kanshi Ram chuckled. He had always regarded Chaudhari Barkat Ali as a brother; he did not need Gandhi to make him aware of that".

Then, Arun, the son of Lala Kanshi Ram, loves Nural-Nissar, the daughter of Chaudhri Barkat Ali. He is ready to become a Muslim for her sake. Munir advised him to show harmony between Hindus and Muslims.

The two friends converse:

"I'll become a Muslim, if your father insists". (Arun) "You don't have to. Why can't you keep your separate religions?" (Munir) "How do we solemnize the marriage?" "A ceremony in a civil court".

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Unity and Love

The atmosphere in Sialkot was peaceful. All people did their jobs calmly. There was really 'lull' all over the city. The only excitement and even that of happiness was experienced on the New Year Celebration called "Hurrah Parade". On other occasions, men worked, children went to schools and women gossiped after household chores. Barkat Ali Chaudhri and the members of his family believe that they all are true Muslims because they are of the opinion that everyone has the right to worship his/her own God. For that reason he accepts Lala Kanshi Ram as his brother. According to him, no animosity should grow between the two communities of different religions. The unity of all religions is the strength of his mind. He is a person who emphasizes the need of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood. And when the communal tension engulfs the tiny town of Sialkot, he is the person who extends all necessary help to Lala Kanshi Ram and his family. He comes to Lala Kanshi Ram's house and informs him that the Muslim rioters will loot and burn the shops and houses owned by Hindus on that street that night. He also advises them to leave the place and to take shelter in the refugee camp. When it is decided that all will have to take shelter at the camp, Munir, the son of Barkat Ali Chaudhri, who has also much concern about Lala Kanshi Ram's family arrives there. Munir and Lala Kanshi Ram's son Arun are friends.

The most important thing is that at this crucial moment of his life Lala Kanshi Ram relies upon the trustworthiness of his Muslim brother Barkat Ali. When vultures hover over the sky of Sialkot, thousands and thousands of Hindus are massacred and their properties are looted and set on fire, a man like Barkat Ali is there to earn the confidence of a riot victim like Lala Kanshi Ram.

The peaceful atmosphere and Hindu-Muslim unity of Sialkot was disturbed by the announcement of Partition by Mountbatten. The Muslims started celebrating the creation of Pakistan with drum-beating and firecrackers. When they passed nearby the two buildings of Bibi Amar Vati, the owner of the house where Lala kanshi Ram and other tenants were lived, they threw some stones which broke the window panes of the houses. The efficient police officers could keep peace. But soon the Muslims started looting shops. And even Lala Kanshi Ram's shop was looted. Then the Muslims started burning one Hindu 'mohalla' every night. Meanwhile, a train came from Amritsar which was full of murdered and wounded

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Muslims. This excited the Muslims who killed and wounded the Hindus in Trunk Bazaar. Soon the Hindus were forced to leave for the Refugee Camp.

The scene of the leaving of the tenant families and of the family of Bibi Amar Vati is really very emotional. The scene symbolizes thousands of such scenes. Fifteen million refugees poured across the borders to regions completely foreign to them, for though they were Hindu or Muslim, their identity had been embedded in the regions where their ancestors were from.

Trying to Heal the Wounds

Many years after the Partition, the two nations are still trying to heal the wounds left behind by this incision to once-whole body of India. Many are still in search of an identity and a history left behind beyond an impenetrable boundary. The two countries started off with ruined economies and lands and without an established, experienced system of government. They lost many of their most dynamic leaders, such as Gandhi, Jinnah and Allama Iqbal. India and Pakistan have been to war twice since the partition and they are still deadlocked over the issue of possession of Kashmir. The same issues of boundaries and divisions, Hindu and Muslim majorities and differences, still persist in Kashmir.

Poignant Description of Historical Trauma

Chaman Nahal exhibits as an accomplished novelist by depicting the historical trauma through novel perspective. And he ends his novel with a sadly depleted family trying to begin a new life in Delhi. *Azadi* has none of the sensationalism of other novels about India's Partition, such as Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* or Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*. Nahal shows the cruelty as well as the humanity of both sides.

The novel also shows the maturing of Arun, Kanshi Ram's only son, but the account of his love, first for Nur, the Muslim girl left behind in Pakistan, and then for Chandni, a low-caste girl who is abducted on the way to India, is not as gripping as the rest of the novel.

To conclude, this novel mainly deals with historical trauma of the theme of Partition. It is a realistic record of the horrible incidents caused by the Partition. It is not less than any

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tragic novel. It should be also mentioned that Chaman Nahal in his novel did not try to criticize one religion against the other - Muslim against Hindu. As we mentioned before Nahal himself was one of those refugees who was compelled to leave Sialkot for India, so he wrote what he had observed.

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