

Chaman Nahal's Focus More on the Loss of Personality than on Material Loss as Laid in his *Azadi*: An Appraisal

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Abstract- This paper throughout an estimation of *Azadi* demonstrates Chaman Nahal's profound knowledge of Gandhian principles and the value of man's dignity, compassion and Love through his characters. Then, Chaman takes more care to view the real range of the events that together with their shared physical and psychological effects on human life. And it neatly includes the great historical events explained in terms of its fullest relation to human implications and individuality.

Index terms- Untouchable, Love, dignity, human life, Gandhian thought, Psychology

INTRODUCTION

It is generally understood that the Indian novelists of the thirties and forties were very much influenced by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, as he was the sole force behind the newly created renaissance of national consciousness. Refreshed by the breath of fresh air from the west, they saw in Gandhi a synthesis of the native traditions and western ideas. Gandhian ideals were stirring the slumberous Indians and these novelists tried to picture the slow but steady revolution taking place in the Indian villages. Most of these writers thus became staunch supporters of Gandhian ideals. Bhabani Bhattacharya, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K.Narayan introduced characters in their novels so as to remind us ever of the physical stature of Gandhi. On the other hand, we have writers like Raja Rao, Mahonar Malgonkar and Raj Gill whose characters opposed. Gandhi and Gandhism. Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Gandhi* showed Gandhi, the great opponent of partition and the great champion of Hindu Muslim unity, as responsible for the partition and the violence in the wake of Indian Independence. In Raj Gills' *The Rape*, the hero, Dalipjit even thought of shooting Gandhi, as he held Gandhi responsible for partition. What is curious to

note is that while Khushwant Singh did not even make even a cursory remark of Gandhi or Gandhism in his novel, Chaman Nahal's projected Gandhi as a living presence. Choudhri Barkat Ali, who lived the life of a true Muslim and believed in the unity of all religions was a true Gandhian. Moreover, almost all the major characters in the novel, with the possible exception of Bibi Amaravati, held Gandhi in high esteem. The assassination of Gandhi was a rude shock to Kanshi Ram's family and inspite of the sufferings and setbacks in her life, Prabha Rani was reluctant to make supper after receiving the news of Gandhi's death. These characters, in a way could identify their predicament with that of the aspirations of Gandhi, to whom the word 'freedom' or 'azadi' had a greater connotation than the word freedom from a colonial rule. To Gandhi, the word signified man's freedom from all sorts of bondages.

Chaman Nahal, as a youth was attracted to Gandhian ideology. He became a forced exile consequent to the partition that subjected thousands of helpless people to callous wanton misery. He remembers how he and other young men used to attend the prayer meetings of Gandhi, at Birla House in 1947. They would throw 'angry questions' at him to which:

"He never gave an answer which was smoothing. And to which he never gave an answer without Making us feel that our pain was his pain too"
(Dhavan 125)

A careful reading of *Azadi* would reveal Nahal's depth of understanding of Gandhian ideals which enabled him to project the value of human dignity, compassion and love through his characters. As Goyal Bhagat observes:

"Nahal with the added advantage of a mellowing

Of all bitterness and hatred with the healing passage of a quarter century, is able to invest his theme with a rare humanistic insight and objectivity” (P 126).

Azadi stresses the continuity of life in spite of harrowing experiences. In the words of R.K.Dhawan, “Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* is an epoch-making book which describes not only the terror and tumult that accompanied, in fact darkened, the attainment of freedom in 1947 but does also envisage man’s *azadi* or freedom from beastliness, from moral, psychological and spiritual malady” (P 126). It is to the credit that for the first time in the history of India, he could kindle the flame of nationalism in the embittered hearts of Indians. For a time, the different sections and religious groups forgot their natural distrust and intolerance and worked together for a common goal-viz-the independence of India. But that this friendship and amity was only at the peripheral level was soon proved by the incidents at the wake of Independence. The prospect of a partition and the sure possibility of leaving one’s birth place embittered large sections of Hindus and Muslims. Even those who had so far abstained from nurturing religious sentiments in their hearts were forced to think on communal lines. This resulted in sudden mutual distrust and ill-feeling. Even Gandhi, who struggled to the last moment to avoid a partition of the nation had to be a mute witness to the official procedures that rendered the division of the subcontinent on communal lines.

The partition of the nation was brought about most abruptly and without any thought of the possible repercussions. The communal holocaust that came in the wake of partition was quite an unexpected development was either quite inadequate or quite unwilling to put out the large scale massacres, arson and looting. The authorities who were entrusted with the duty of putting out the communal frenzy often turned partisan and as a result, a large number of innocent men, women and children had to succumb to the communal hatred. That the partition of the subcontinent on the basis of religious groups was most illogical has been sounded by many historians. Commenting on the situation, Collins and Lapier observe thus:

“No aspect of partition, however, was more illogical than the fact that even if Jinnah’s Pakistan was fully

Realized it would still deliver barely half of India’s Moslems from the alleged inequities of Hindu majority

Rule which justified the state in the first place. The Remaining Moslems were so scattered throughout the rest of India that it was humanly impossible to separate

them. Islands in a Hindu sea, they would be the first victims of a conflict between the two countries ... even

after the amputation, India will still harbour almost 50 million Moslems” (P 109).

Gandhi, who had all along fought the two nation theory had to yield at last owing to the pressure of circumstances. He endorsed the resolution of the A.I.C.C. by saying that “sometimes certain decisions, however, unpalatable they might be, had to be taken” (Menon 353).

Azadi which won Chaman Nahal the Sahitya Academy Award in 1977 is a novel directly concerned with the partition and its aftermath. The novel makes a moderate attempt to diagnose the malady, leading to the inhuman catastrophe, thereby criticizing the Hindu and Muslim leaders responsible for the partition and the bloodshed that dazed everyone. Chaman Nahal, who was born in Sialkot, was forced to flee to India following the partition. His own position of a ‘forced exile’ tormented his self in his mature years. He thus gives vent to his purpose behind the creation of *Azadi*:

“I have always rejected the two-nation theory; the Creation of Pakistan in no way solved the problem of the minorities. And till this day, I pine for the city in which I was born and raised. I see this as the typical yearning of all involuntary exiles. Hence, I wrote *Azadi* as a hymn to one’s land of birth, rather than a realistic novel of the partition” (P 40).

The novel centres round the fortunes of Lala Kanshi Ram, a whole sale grain merchant of Sialkot. Lord Mount Batten’s announcement on June 3, 1947 with regard to freedom and partition of the Indian subcontinent came as a thunderbolt upon the peaceful life of Kanshi Ram. The Muslim dominated city of Sialkot soon became unsafe for the Hindu minority. Kanshi Ram is forced to flee the city with other Hindu and Sikh families. The sporadic acts of

murder, looting and arson subsequently explode into massive and organized violence by the Muslims. Kanshi Ram, his wife Prabha Rani and their only son Arun join the foot convoy. On their way, they are subjected to untold miseries and hardships. They had to witness the death and rape of many near and dear ones. At last, they reach Delhi, where in the face of severe ordeals they settle down to begin a new life.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes:

“Nahal’s concentrates on Lala Kanshi Ram’s family, but the mind can and does, like a computer multiply the horror and the pity a million fold, and try to get at the measure of the total holocaust” (P 750).

The people of the frontier states, especially the Punjab had the real taste of partition – not as a geographical division of the main land, but as a sharp knife cutting across the age old amity and tradition that had bound the Hindus and Muslims for generations. They had even come to share the rituals and festivals of the two religions, irrespective of their own religious loyalties. Religious differences seemed to melt away forming stable personal relationships among people of the two communities. Nahal does portray the intimacy of Lalakanshi Ram’s family with that of Choudri Barkat Ali. It is quite significant that Chandhri Baskat Ali’s loyalty to his friend is not in the least affected by the frenzy of his own fellow Muslims. Narrow-minded sectarian ideas have no place in his mind. He knows that “God is great and Muhammed is his prophet. But the same God is the God of the Hindus as well, and if they preferred to worship him in another form, that was their business” (Azadi 96). Choudhri Barkat Ali is a strong critic of religious fanaticism. He is the right man with the right kind of ideas. Nahal maintains remarkable impartiality in narrating the ugly incidents following the partition. He puts the blame squarely on the warring communities. While the Hindus suffered in the burning West Punjab, the Muslims too were in miserable plight in the Eastern part of Punjab. The Hindus felt unprotected and forlorn in the declared land for the Muslims. The leaders were hollow and uncertain and the government appeared to be against the people. Kanshi Ram felt bewildered at the strange inaction of the government in preventing violence.

He thus tells Arun:

“If unwilling, the government is a party to murder. If incapable, we Indians had no right to ask for freedom” (Azadi 124)

The communal elements in the government were really fanning the flames of communal hatred. Their intentions are revealed by Choudhri Barkat Ali in these words:

“Either the Congress Muslims were a fraud to Begin with, or they have changed sides. I’m afraid there is no organized body of Muslims denouncing what is happening in the city” (P 134).

Arun’s romance with Nur, the daughter of Choudhri Barkat Ali is sheltered with the partition. Nur, with her unreasoning youth and love feels that Pakistan should not stand between the lovers. But Arun’s approach to the situation is realistic for he knows the fanatics and feels that the Hindus will be forced to leave Pakistan. Nur wants Arun to stay behind and embrace Islam. The partition of the country brings about a thorough change in the placid life of Lala Kanshi Ram. He is shocked to hear such terms ‘minority community’ and ‘refugee’. He is started to know that he is a refugee in his ‘own home’. This novel, no doubt, portrays a number of incidents in which the refugees were the victims of uncontrollable and unimaginative violence. It completely destroyed the atmosphere of brotherhood, harmony, trust, love and solidarity and replaced it by hatred, disgust, murder, fire, rape and arson.

Nahal fully succeeded in establishing the true dimensions of the events that accompanied partition, showing their physical as well as psychological impacts on human life. The focus is very often on the loss of personality caused by this tragic event rather than an irreparable material loss. He rather brilliantly portrays how the religious faiths of people are put to the test by an impending calamity and how compromises are made for the bare, basic need to survive. Gangu Mal, decides to embrace Islam just for the sake of retaining his property in the city. He considers material comforts above family relationship. But to Sardar Niranjan Singh, religion is more important than his life. He is not ready to make religion a matter of convenience. When it comes to the question of cutting his hair so that he could reach

India safe, he proclaims:

“Life I’ll gladly lose

My Sikh dharma, I won’t” (Azadi 262)

Azadi thus presents a great historical event, in terms of its full human implications seem and felt through the lives of a few individuals. In the end, Lala Kanshi Ram learns to transcend narrow communal consideration and his mind is ruled by pity, compassion and love. The hardships that he faces in Delhi increases his moral responsibilities and feels sorry over the death of Gandhi. K.S.Ramamurthy rightly observes:

“Kanshi Ram’s individual’s consciousness has in the end matured and developed into a national consciousness, rather a purely humanistic consciousness” (P 133).

There is no denying the fact that Nahal takes particular care to portray the true dimensions of the events that accompanied the partition, showing their physical and psychological impacts on human life. Chaman Nahal belongs to the humanistic tradition initiated by Anand in the thirties and carried on by Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya in the fifties and sixties.

To conclude, Nahal’s theory of fiction is analogous to that of Bhattacharya who believes in the social purpose of fiction. In his philosophy of life, Nahal is a positive affirmationist, who “upholds the values of life and shows life worth living with optimism and facing the challenges courageously” (Bhatnagar 23).

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