Azadi: Partition Holocaust

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Abstract

Chaman Nahal's Azadi, concludes on a note of forgiveness as the only means through which Indians can recover their sanity. And Lala Kanshi Ram, the protagonist of the novel, feels that to live at peace with oneself, one must cease to hate and learn to forgive. Thus humanism is very transparent in Nahal's Novels. Azadi by Chaman Nahal accepts the partition as a fact, an inevitable happening and he does not blame anybody for the partition but he effectively showcases the excruciating pain, repercussions after independence in 1947 and halocaust experienced by people around.

Keywords: Azadi, Sanity, Inevitable Happening, Excruciating Pain, Holocaust And Repercussions.

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‘*Azadi*’ is a significant contribution to the body of creative literature which has sprung round the theme of partition. The Partition of India in 1947 was such a cataclysmic event for the country. The people who were eye witnesses to the horror and violence of those sad happening. No other event in the history of this country had created so tremendous an impact on India’s intellectuals and writers who continue to be haunted by it even today, after more than 7 decades. “K. R. Srinivas Iyengar opines that “ Novels on the ‘partition’ horrors and bestiality are religion, but it is not often they transcend sensationalism and achieve the discipline of if art.” (Iyengar, 2008)¹

There are countless writers who have expounded on the theme of partition. Punjabi writers like, Nanak Sin, Kartar Singh Duggar, Amrita Pritam and several others have written novels, short stories and poems dealing with the trauma of the division of the country. The Hindi novelist like Yashpal Bhisham Sahni has authentically treated the harrowing experience of the Partition days. And Qurratulain Haider’s *Aag Ka Darga* is an outstanding novels among the Urdu novels on the theme of partition. And Sadat Hagan Manto’s explosive short stories; Yash pal’s *Jhootha*; Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* and Khushwant Singh’s *A Train to Pakistan* are all among the memorable contributions on this tragic and moving theme. The term ‘holocaust fiction’ signifies the body of works that deal with The European civilization in the years between 1913 to 1945. A few Indo Anglian novelists try to re- live those horrors ridden days in their novels. These novelists are Attia Hospain, C. Nabal, B. Rajan and Raj Gill. They have a tendency to confess the violence but deny the communal disharmony which led to the Partition. And Partition has been treated only as a side issue in waiting for the Mahatma of R.K. Narayan. He refers to the exodus of refugees Utter chaos, rioting and shortage of food supplies in India at the time of the

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Partition. In *A Bend in the Ganges*, Malgonkar depicts the genesis of the partition as part of the process of national struggle for independence in India and the gradual widening of the rift between the two communities like E.M Forster.

“The East- West confrontation that Foster dramatizes in *A Passage to India* is represented in the struggles of the Cambridge- educated Krishanan who has returned to India, his native home. But it is not the main point of the narrative ; it is Krishanan’s search he encounters two tragedies, the tragedy of Kamala’s death and the tragedy of of the portion of India. “ (Varma , 2001)²

Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*, ends on a note of forgiveness as the only means through which Indians can recover their sanity. Lala Kanshi Ram, the protagonist of the novel, feels that to live at peace with oneself, one must cease to hate and learn to forgive. Thus humanism is very transparent in Nahal’s Novels. “...*Azadi* by Chaman Nahal accepts the partition as a fact, an inevitable happening and he does not blame anybody for the partition.” (Mohan Rao, 1993)⁵ And other novels like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children* (1981) and Sharif Mukkadam’s *When Freedom came* (1982) are also an evidence of the continuing and undiminished interest in this theme. A great novel about the Partition will be an epic in prose. It is certainly Chaman Nahal’s ‘*Azadi*’ which is important in this context that it is by far the most extensive and perhaps the most authentic novel about the Partition in English.

‘*Azadi*’, a Hindi word, which means ‘ freedom’ is one of the novels of Gandhi Quartet, reckoned to be Chaman Nahal’s best novel, which won for him Sahitya Academy Award and also The Federation of Indian Publisher Award. Nahal writes this novel from his personal experience of having lived in Sialkot at the time of partition. He calls ‘*Azadi*’ as a

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hymn to one's land of birth. Khushwant Singh's 'Train to Pakistan' also witnesses the atrocities committed on the minorities after the announcement of the partition. This novel is based on the horrors of the partition and the holocaust created by the communal frenzy and it also gives an intense picture of the effect of partition on the lives of the people living in the boarder town of Sialkot. Nahal's 'Azadi' begins with the announcement of the Partition and this is where Manohar Malgonkar's 'A Bend in the Ganges' (1962) ends. Here Nahal seems to have picked up the thread of partition from where Manohar Malgonkar left it.

'Azadi', a flawless work opens gracefully with an unfolding of Lala Kanshi Ram's small world, his beliefs, superstitions and poised relationships with his wife, children and neighbours around. It is the story of an individual, who is no doubt the representative of millions of men and women. These are others interesting Parallels in both the novels that lend themselves to a fruitful comparative study. The relationship between a Hindu boy Arun and a Muslim girl Nur in Azadi. A strange smell exuded from Nur and Arun became aware of it all at once. She herself was having a feeling of well being, a hypnotic calm and she relaxed her back which she had kept stiff and went limp in Arun's arms. A little later in 'Azadi' we find an important episode that shows the deft handling of a complex emotional situation. Arun and Munir (Nur's brother) intimate friends as they are have no awareness of any hostility between Hindus and Muslims out side the world. Srikanth observes that "It is realistic, descriptive, un-nerving and the writer is literally a historical witness to the scene but not a participant in the interior drama of suffering and tension , conflict and agony as can be seen in the writer of Azadi." (Srinath, 2002)³

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It is the partition that has poisoned the natural, human relationships and we notice the intricacies of the sensitive genuflections that both Arun and Munir experience after their meeting with their admired friend Bill Waridson ; the English man in whose presence they forget that they are ruled by the British. Munir and Arun cycle towards Trunk Bazaar, they say only a barely audible good night to each other. The delicate development in the relationship between two intimate friends is hinted at by the silence pervading between them symbolically the friends too part at a point after saying a barely audible good night. M. K Naik says that

“ This account of the migration of Lala Kanshi Ram, a Sialkot grain merchant and his family to India at the time of the dismemberment of colonial India into two nations in 1947, is easily one of the most comprehensive fictional accounts of the Partition holocaust in Indian English literature.” (Naik, 1992)⁴

The harmonious atmosphere and co-operation among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs which prevails in the Muslim dominated city of Sialkot is affected by the Partition. Lala recollects how Muslims helped the Hindus in making preparations for their festivals like Dussehra. when effigies were made by Muslim workmen; the crackers and the fireworks too were supplied by the Muslims. While Muslims celebrate their joy about the news of Partition and creation of Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs think of how to save themselves against the impending attacks of the frenzied and fanatical mobs of Muslims. Not naturally, the division of the country on a communal basis does bring about a psychological wedge, an emotional and spiritual rift among the civil, police and military personnel of undivided India. Everything looks so confused, so uncertain, so tense and grim.

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Azadi, thus deals with eight tumultuous months in the history of the Indian subcontinent. The impact of some other historical events preceeding this period is also discernible. Interspersed in the novel are reference to the Cripps Mission, the Radcliffe Boundary commission, the Interim Government with Nehru as Prime Minister and the Sikh demand that the river Chenab should be the boundary between India and Pakistan. There are frequent references to Gandhi's offer to Jinnah for a home- land for Muslims within an independent India itself. *Azadi* clearly deals with a momentous period of our history. '*Azadi*', however, does not merely give us a historical document. The great actors involved in the drama of this time- Mountbatten, Rajaji, Jinnah, Gandhiji, Nehru and a host of other national leaders are all present but none of them appears in person in the novel. They are all described through the reactions of the people.

Nahal's purpose is not to depict history but to describe the impact of the historical tragedy of the Partition on ordinary people. *Azadi* is, in fact, the story of millions of people uprooted from their homes for no fault of their own and this story is symbolised in the person of Lala Kanshi Ram and his family and the pain that they go through during the process of this upheaval in their lives and their alienation from their own home- land. Lala Kanshi Ram is a wholesale dealer in grain, whose interest in politics is skin - deep and whose only deviation from routine business is to attend the meeting of the local Arya Samaj. He has lived in Sialkot, a small town, for years, has prospered there and is unwilling to leave even after the Partition is announced. An Arya Samajist to the core, at one stage the thought of converting himself to Islam crosses his mind, so great is the compulsion to stay on in his native town. He is mild- mannered and has always pulled on well with his Muslim friends ; in fact his dearest friend is a Muslim, Chaudhari Barkat Ali. Never does it occur to him that he can ever be

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unwanted in his own native place. Lala Kanshi Ram finally leaves his birthplace like other Hindus and Sikhs. His daughter becomes a victim of communal riots: there is in fact no family left unscattered, no family that does not lose a near and dear one. Like millions of other Punjabis, he travel on foot to India with his wife Prabha and son Arun, moves from city suffer more humiliation. His story represents the story of a whole nation, of millions who were forced to leave their homes and to whom Azadi brings only untold misery and an uncertain future.

If 'Azadi,' freedom, makes people free from alien rule, the partition and the havoc it causes result in "the loss of ability to communicate" in private life. But Nahal, the affirmationist, tells us that suffering, pain, and death are only a prelude to a new life, full of hope. Working at her sewing machine, Sunanda suggest tenacity of the human spirit and a life of action. A study of the novel reveals that taken together, the three parts form a meaningful sequence and there is an underlying unity of structure. The arrangement of the events and actions, the interaction between the characters involved, the description of incidents and the emphasis on causality reveal Nahal's skill in constructing a well-knit plot. There are no loose threads in the novel. Nahal succeeds in arousing our interest and in creating suspense. The plot is concerned with the vivisection of the country into two sovereign states, India and Pakistan, displacement of millions of people like Lala Kanshi Ram on either side of the dividing border, the journey of Lala Kanshi Ram along with the members of his family and his neighbours from Sialkot to India, their awful and ghastly experiences before they set foot on the Indian soil, their disappointment at their failure to establish their identity by securing an independent house, an address of their own, the reported assassination of Gandhi and the valiant efforts of Lala Kanshi Ram and Sunanda to

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establish themselves again. Nahal is at his best in delineating the characters in *Azadi*. N. Radha Krishnan observes: "He shows all the qualities of a mature artist. He does not throw the blame on anybody and doesn't betray anger, remorse and escapism. He presents an earnest study of a people who are caught up in the whirlwind of communal frenzy and for whom every moment means death and doom." As the whole narrative centres Round Lala Kanshi Ram, he, in the course of the novel, emerges as larger than life. However, the other characters are also fictionally important and they serve the thematic purpose.

'*Azadi*' deals with the Partition riots and genocide effectively, maintaining a high level of literary and thematic excellence. It faithfully presents an in-depth study of the decade. Though the Second World War shook the very foundations of the world and the partition riots wounded the people of India, a peaceful and non-violent India emerged after these. Also, like Chaman Nahal, Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh and Bhisham Sahni do not hold any single individual responsible for the tragedies that unfold in the wake of splitting the subcontinent into two independent nations. All the same, a discerning reader notices that *Azadi*, more than any other novel on the theme of India's Partition, stresses the profound significance of human life and provides an integral view of life. What, according to K. Venkata Reddy, the novel seeks to present is how man is the victim of forces of history. Nonetheless, "there is a note of hope and affirmation of life. Underlying the awful irony of the stupendous drama of history is the author's positive attitude manifested in the showing of futility of hatred and triumph of love." After the holocaust of partition, Lala Kanshi Ram and other refugees from Pakistan realize that they can live more honourably as human beings in independent India. As soon as they hear the news of Gandhi's assassination, it is realistic descriptive unnerving and the writer is literally a historical witness to the scene but not a

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participant in the interior drama of suffering and tension conflicts and agony as can be seen in the writer of 'Azadi. " The freedom struggle ultimately brought independence to the country and ensured minimum rights for the people. But it created an area of darkness and made India a wounded civilisation." (Elizabeth John, 2009)⁵

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