

Pathos of Partition and Disruption: Exploration of Chaman Nahal's Select Work

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ABSTRACT

The novel Azadi deals with the theme of partition of Indian sub continent into India and Pakistan. As Chaman Nahal was himself a refugee, he writes with remarkable penetration and realism. The novel is historical, political and above all, a great work of art. Nahal presented life like picture of the period of Partition. 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 partition, the horrible incidents caused by the partition and the pitiable condition 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.

Key Words- refugee, complacent, beastly, slaughter, minorities, convoys.

INTRODUCTION

Nahal's *Azadi*, won Sahitya Academy Award in 1977, deals with the dawn of freedom, the tragedy of Partition and its aftermath i.e., the mass migration and the massacre and also the arrival of large numbers of people as refugees to both India as well as Pakistan. *Azadi* not only reflects the savagery and atrocities of the Partition, but also probes into the variables that caused the tragedy. It portrays the dilemmas of innocent victims by some forces beyond their control. Chaman Nahal deals with the situation prevailing in Pakistan in his *Azadi* (1975).

The setting of *Azadi* is in Sialkot in the West Punjab which is now in Pakistan and it covers a period of about eight months from June 3, 1947 to the death of Mahatma Gandhi's on 30th January, 1948. Nahal's protagonist Kanshi Ram has seen many generations live and die in the same place, which accounts for his great attachment to the place. That is why he feels such deep anguish and alienation when he is uprooted from the motherland, which has nurtured and nourished him for generations together.

The action of the novel centers on Lala Kanshi Ram, a wholesale grain merchant in Sialkot and his family and how they are affected by Partition. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims have been living together in peace and harmony for many decades in the Punjab city of Sialkot. Partition disturbs the peaceful and complacent life of the people and the novelist explores this disturbance with profound sympathy and condemns the inhuman atrocities perpetrated on the innocent people. Kanshi Ram's world is shaken by the creation of Pakistan and he stands as a shattered individual, his cherished beliefs and values not giving him support, the account of his migration to India along with his family. The novel opens on June 3, 1947 with an announcement by the then Viceroy Lord Mountbatten declaring the division of the country into two parts-India and Pakistan.

Events are presented through the consciousness of Lala Kanshi Ram, who becomes a spokesman of the Hindus, who are deeply disturbed by the unprecedented political event. Lala's experiences symbolize the pain and sufferings of the millions affected by the Partition. Thus *Azadi* is not only the story of Lala Kanshi

Ram but millions of people like him. Lala has brought a few acres of land in his native village and prospered there. He tries to educate his illiterate wife Prabha Rani, who takes it indulgently as one of her husband's whims. He leads a quiet life with his wife and children at Sialkot. He has a daughter, Madhubala, married off to Rajiv and a college going son, Arun. He lives in a rented house belonging to Bibi Amar Vati along with Sikh families which enhances the atmosphere of communal harmony and also maintains healthy relationships with his neighbors and friends irrespective of religion. He has no interest in politics but is deeply influenced by Arya Samaj.

Lala Kanshi Ram has been expressing his fear ever since the British has set a time limit for independence. The British has announced that they would have India by June, 1948 when India would have its azadi. He does not understand why they are now in a hurry to go and is confused by their designs to hand over power to any constituted authority or authorities.

Lala Kanshi Ram is also critical of Gandhiji-Rajaji's offer to Jinnah in 1944, which boosted Jinnah's confidence to work for the creation of Pakistan vigorously. He makes Congress responsible for bringing about the Partition. The talk of giving to the Muslims a section in the East of India and a section in the West has made Jinnah to be aware of his dream. Though it speaks of a common defense and foreign policy, it gave Jinnah a vision of separate state, "Until then Jinnah had talked of Pakistan, but he did not quite know what he meant by it. Gandhi, by going to him, not only gave Pakistan a name, he gave Jinnah a name too" (*Azadi* 27). Lala Kanshi Ram is of the opinion that the announcement of the Partition of the country into two states has brought glory and popularity to Jinnah, and is rather a personal triumph for the leader of the Muslim League. Like an average Indian, he is worried about the division of the country and of the brutal violence that might follow it. Partition is the only subject discussed that day in each home and in each street corner. Lala is disturbed to think of the horrible consequences of the proposed Partition, the fate of the four hundred million people. He knows that if Muslims come to power, there would be a lot of killing at the Partition. Since the whole business is in the hands of the Hindus, the Muslims may not be able to dispense with them easily. But it is also possible that the Muslims want only the wealth of the Hindus and not the community itself. Lala with others like Lala Radhey Shyam, Lala Banarsi Das and Lala Shamsher Bahadur, is hopeful that Gandhiji would save them with his 'Shakti', while some others seek assurance in the British who all along had spoken about united India. However, Muslims merchants like Abdu al Ghani know pretty well that Pakistan is a certainty.

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 recalls 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" (*Azadi* 75), 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.

The first riot took place in Sialkot on the twenty-fourth of June, a day after the Legislative Assembly of the Punjab formally decides in Lahore to opt for the Partition of the province. Nahal narrates the communal fire that spread the country thus: "...Many cities of the Punjab had been aflame for months; there were large scale killings and lootings in Lahore, Gujarat, Gujranwala, Amritsar, Ambala, Jullundur Rawalpindi, Multan, Ludhiana and Sargodha" (*Azadi* 104). On twenty fourth of June itself, the Muslims at Sialkot killed some Hindus in their excitement and then it becomes a daily ritual.

The life of Hindus in Sialkot becomes miserable as their shops and houses are looted, men are stabbing and women are raped. They feel very insecure. Lala was deeply disturbed, when his shop was looted by some Muslims at night, Government has set up many refugee camps to provide shelter for the Hindus and Sikhs. The terms 'Refugee' and 'Refugee Camp' being unfamiliar and unpalatable to Lala, he is unwilling to leave Sialkot to go to the refugee camp. He expresses his anxiety for having become a landless,

homeless and rootless man. He is fully aware of the fact that Muslims will not tolerate the presence of Hindus and Sikhs and that the government of Pakistan would not be able to protect them.

The life of Hindus in Sialkot becomes miserable. The Hindus are forced to undergo the painful experience of displacement and migration. Despite their deep emotional attachment to their land and home, they are forced to leave them and go in search of new places for final settlement. The government has arranged many refugee camps to facilitate the process of mass migration from one country to another. Lala is reluctant to leave the place in spite of pressure from his family.

Independence brings more violence and killings. Lala's daughter Madhu and her husband Rajiv have been killed when they are in a train on their way to Sialkot to her parents in one of the train massacres. Lala, Prabha Rani and Arun are heartbroken at the unexpected and premature death of Madhu and Rajiv. Dazed and completely broken, Lala decides to migrate to India as early as possible abandoning all hopes of ever returning to Sialkot.

The communal riots and murders do not cease in spite of the governmental effort to maintain peace in the region. He is angry with the leaders for their failure to read the whole situation correctly. He strongly believes that they should have planned much ahead the relief measures to be taken before rushing to Partition. At the Refugee Camp, Lala trusts General Rees, the Commander-in-Chief of the Punjab Boundary Force, that he would protect the minorities in Punjab. Rees has failed to maintain peace in the province. Minorities in the East and the West Punjab are slaughtered right before the eyes of the Boundary Force men. Nahal speaks of new kind of caste system that developed among the refugees. According to this, no calamity are private then and the greater your sufferings and losses, the more important you become in the eyes of others:

Everyone has lost property. That was nothing, but if you lost a limb or if a member of your family had been killed or raped or forcibly abducted, you won a medal for yourself. Your neighbors in the camp commandant were to receive you for a personal interview and in the matter of dry rations or other physical facilities you straight away received a preferential treatment (*Azadi* 184).

The only way to protect minorities during Partition is to devise means of migration and then shifting the minorities to the areas where they become a majority community. The Partition throws millions of people in flight. Convoys of ten miles are not unusual, and they are common in both directions: Virtually the entire five hundred and fifty miles of the border between East and West Punjab was used by the refugees to cross from one side to the other and heading for the point nearest to their own homes. When the convoy stays at Narowal, news about the parade of the naked Hindu women reached them. This brutal act brings to light the communal prejudices and moral debasement of the rioters. Nahal gives the realistic and horrible account of these acts:

A number of abducted Hindu and Sikh women were in their custody. Many of the kidnapped women disappeared into private homes. A lone Muslim dragged a woman away, and kept her for his own exclusive use. Or he took her with the consent of other Muslims, converted her to Islam, and got married to her. The rest were subjected to mass rape, at times in public places and in the presence of large gatherings. The rape was followed by other atrocities, chopping off the breasts, and even death. Many of the pregnant women had their wombs torn open. The survivors were retained for repeated rapes and humiliations, until they were parceled out to decrepit wrecks the aged, the leftovers who couldn't find a wife, or those Muslims who wanted an additional wife. In the meantime more women were abducted and the cycle was repeated all over again (*Azadi* 258).

It is obvious that the novelist clearly suggests that the rioter were deprived enough to dishonor the Hindu women folk and to subject them to beastly atrocities. The administration does not interfere in such incidents. The news of the parade of naked Hindu women by the Muslims in the bazaar of Narowal in the

afternoon numbed the Hindus and Sikhs in the camp. He suggests that rioters are crude and low-minded enough to derive beastly pleasure out of their behavior which should have put them to shame.

Having seen both the Hindus and the Muslims resorting to crime and violence in the name of religion, Lala is convinced that both are guilty being responsible for the communal strife, Gandhiji's assassination by a Hindu further confirms his opinion. He tells his wife, "I can't hate the Muslims any more... what I mean is, whatever the Muslims did to us in Pakistan, we're doing it to them here!" (*Azadi* 298). He feels miserable and repentant and seeks to apologise all the Muslims on behalf of all the Hindus when he says "we have sinned as much. We need their forgiveness!" (*Azadi* 300). The novelist, however, demonstrates that even after Partition, some Muslims stand for communal harmony. Chaudari Barkat Ali is one such large hearted person who does not support any anti-Hindu violence. When Prabha Rani expresses her resentment of the people of Pakistan, Lala appeals to her to forgive them.

Azadi presents an ideal picture of Gandhi, it by all means can be considered as a Gandhian novel. Nahal celebrate Gandhian values through suffering of Lala Kanshi Ram. The novel portrays two images of Gandhi: one, the image of Gandhi as responsible for Partition and his failure to avoid it; second, the image of Gandhi as a messenger of Hindu-Muslim amity. As many Indian of the time expected, some of the characters in the novel too expect that Gandhi would never accept the Partition plan. For the Lalas, the only ray of hope is Gandhi who would never agree to a division of the country. This kind of expectation from the Mahatma resulted in blaming him as being responsible for the division of the country, he could have prevented it. The spirit of the novel does not endorse this view.

At the basis of the writer's vision in the novel is the Gandhian ideology. As a Gandhian hero, the protagonist Lala kanshi Ram's motives in the entire narrative are guided by the Gandhian principle. His attitude that India must win freedom without the division of the subcontinent represents that of an average Indian of the time influenced as he might be the Gandhian whirlwind. Lala's friendship with chaudhri Barkat Ali that symbolizes communal harmony is further invested with the idea of Gandhian secularism. Nahat defines the meaning of 'freedom in a typical Gandhian idiom: that Azadi' means 'self-discipline' and 'self-sacrifice", which can be achieved through Hindu-Muslim unity.

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