

The Great Divide: A Study of Chaman Nahal's Azadi

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Abstract: The paper shall unfold the narrative genius of Chaman Nahal as a novelist who successfully depicted the drastic scenario of partition that resulted into a great divide not only of land but of human consciousness also. Chaman Nahal has expertly painted the horror of the divide, the terror is both physical and mental. Although the novel may appear melodramatic yet this much is certain that it represented human trauma of the divided land. The paper shall discuss the major theme of the novel laying bare inhuman situation that followed the political partition of India and Pakistan and which resulted into the devastation of the lives and properties of the common citizen.

Keywords: Violence, Partition, Massacre, Turmoil, Communalism, Riot, Petitions, Settlement.

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* which won him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award depicts in graphic detail the catastrophic incidents that took place immediately after the announcement in June 1947 of the British intention to partition India before they quit the sub-continent. The novel is a realistic portrayal of the contradictions, the hope and disillusionments, the narrowness of the outlook and the occasional acts of kindness and humanity in the face of disaster. Nahal has portrayed how the partition of the country and its subsequent disaster changes the fates of millions living around the border areas. This novel is different from all such novels written on the same theme as it also portrays very convincingly the psychological changes the characters undergo, facing many dehumanising incidents with a few shades of humanity and compassion here and there.

The traumatic phenomenon matures the characters emotionally and psychologically so much so that they convey a message of forget and forgive. The novel does not fail to depict the apathy of the local government officials, their callous attitude arouses mutual suspicion among the refugees and they feel like an alien in their own land. The novel is aptly divided into three parts: The Lull, The Storm and The Aftermath.

The events of the novel begin with the announcement of the 3rd June 1947 when the Viceroy makes the formal announcement, on All India Radio, of the Great divide. The protagonist, Lala Kanshi Ram, a grain merchant of Sialkot lives with his wife Prabhavati and his only son Arjun. Chaman Nahal points out invariably that Lalaji spoke Punjabi but wrote in Urdu. Nahal put forth the argument: “Who said it was the language of the Muslim? He had learned it from his father and from his primary teacher in his village a few miles out of Sialkot, and neither of the two was a Muslim”; (p.14) the message is crystal clear language has no religion.

Like many, Lalaji too hated the British and was happy to get the new of the political independence but at the same time he admired the British for their uprightness, sense of justice, discipline and rule of law. Kanshi Ram was a rich and respectable merchant of the town and the announcement made him unsteady, deep down his heart he was gripped with the fear of unknown and an air of uncertainty made him restless; worried and feared he asks his wife Prabha Devi what “if the English agree to give Pakistan to Jinnah” (p.20) he gives voice to the four hundred million people. They did not conceive of being pushed out of their own land, in the name of freedom. They believed that if Pakistan is created, they would be ruined. It was not only Kanshi Ram’s concern but “in each home, on each street corner, this was the only subject discussed that day” (47)

The announcement made by the Viceroy was listened by all the families living in Biwi Amravati’s two houses on fort street as tenants with bated hearts. The people of Punjab in general and of Sialkot in particular were till then living as Punjabis suddenly becomes Hindus and Muslims. The Muslims celebrated the news of Partition and the creation of Pakistan with great gusto by bursting crackers and shouting slogans and the Hindus and Sikhs in their own turn could only think of defending themselves from the impending attacks of the frenzied and fanatical mobs of Muslims.

Nahal shows how Abdul Ghani a poor earthen hukkah seller finds his fortune in the banishment of Lala Kanshi Ram, the rich grain merchant of Sialkot. Abdul is not an individual but representative of many like him for whom Partition is an economic boon. The news of partition comes as a blow, the Hindus and the Sikhs feel betrayed. They see no chance of the safety of their life and property. The tired voice of their beloved leader Nehru could not console them, they find the mere idea of partition stupid, “What stupid things was he talking about? Was he really Nehru?... but what nonsense was this of no panic, no violence, full protection from the government, peace the main object: had he gone mad? (65)

Nahal sketches the character of Inspector Inayat Ullah who openly sided the Muslims, Nahal writes: “It was a matter of conscience. For years he had ordered lath charges on Muslim processions at the command of the British Government” (79) Inayat is not a sole example there were officers like the camp commander Rahmatullah who tried to molest Sunanda, the widow of Suraj Prakash, the adopted son of Biwi Amravati and Gangu Mull.

Nahal draws a pathetic picture of the partition with a compassionate pen for despite of all negativity he sketches characters like Deputy Commissioner Pran Nath and Superintendent of Police Ali Siddique of Sialkot who though failed yet tried their best to stop the bestiality.

Sialkot was turned into a riot torn city. The announcement of the division of the sub-continent changed the whole scenario, humanity suffered, and the suffering is aptly represented by Nahal through Sialkot and its citizens.

Leaving Sialkot and crossing the borders was something that Kanshi Ram detested the most and when his close associate Chaudhuri Barkat Ali suggested him to leave the city, he agreed with a hope that he shall one day return back to his dear place again.

But, the sheer helplessness and frustration of leaving everything behind, he had built in the last thirty years took its toll on him. In his disgust he could not understand whom to blame. Biwi Amravati feels that they are cheated by Gandhi and Kanshi Ram blames everybody, the politicians, the leaders like Nehru and Jinnah, the British Government.

The novel highlights the disillusionment of the common mass because everyone had placed total faith in Gandhi, thinking that as long as he was alive, he would not let the partition of the country take place but after the partition, they felt, they had been let down by him. (Pathan, 105-06)

Nahal does not fail to show the idealistic face of the colonial rulers and Bill Davidson a British friend of Arun, Lala Kanshi Ram's son, feels sorry about the entire chaos and lays the burden of the same upon his own men. He says: "It is we who are pushing things" (122)

With the usual communal-political debate, the novel has its shades of romance and love too. Like most of the novels on the theme of partition Chaman Nahal too projects a love relationship between Arun and Nurul Nisar or Nu, the daughter of Chaudhuri Barkat Ali. The Partition and the newly won freedom acted as a villain which thereby resulted in conflict and bitterness. Arun is forced to leave his city with his parents because he cannot embrace Islam. Nur refutes Arun and says: "Oh, go and die somewhere. You're a Hindu, after all a Hindu, too timid" (96-97) prior to Partition embracing Islam was not so embarrassing but the divide changed it all. The novelist skilfully portrays the psychological effect of the political event. The Partition effected human psyche and their attitude.

The geographical change resulted into mental change too. Arun in his way to Indian border is entangled with a charwoman's daughter Chandni, this love affair acts as a relief in between the deepening gloom of communal violence according to G.S.Balaramagupta. (44)

The second chapter, 'The Storm' deals mostly with the stark reality of those days; cruelty and vengeance. Nahal graphically portrays the brutality of the merciless slaughters of the minorities in the trains, violent spasmodic attacks on the convoys moving towards the border, rapes and parades of naked women on both sides of the border.

Storm enters the life of the protagonist, Lala Kanshi Ram, with the news of the death of his daughter Madhu and her husband in one of the many train butcheries. They were coming from Nizamabad when the train was looted and all the Hindu and Sikh passengers were slaughtered.

The scene of mass slaughter was a common sight on both sides of the border. Lala Kanshi Ram wonders: "Now, why in the name of Allah, were they so sad? They had got what they wanted, their Pakistan. Why this gloom?" (178) The ghastly sight of heaps of corpses, the way so many dead were "dumped there without sentiment or concern" and the communal venom in the Ghani's enthusiasm in informing Arun: "Who told you your sister was killed, my boy? But don't worry. I put her and her husband into the fire with my own hands, and they're now on their way to *dozakh*, to hell- where I hope they rot for ever!" (184) were the immediate consequences of the partition. These events did not remain mere incidents 'out there'; they metamorphosed human sensibility and behavioural pattern. Arun, who just before the disaster was just a shy, pimply young man of twenty years, a student of Murray College, suddenly becomes a responsible son and a grown-up man who tries his level best to protect and be with his parents in all kith and kin.

Like other novels on this theme *Azadi* too collocates the depressing details of collective violence with the basic human goodness. The novelist does not fail to portray a character like Chaudhuri Barkat Ali who risking his own life ensures a safe return of Arun and Suraj Prakash, the adopted son of Biwi Amravati.

Nahal depicts the grotesque parade of naked Hindu women at Narowal, the degenerate and vulgar behaviour of the onlookers but at the same the story parallels cruelties with heart-warming incidents too and the reader here finds an old hakim who "... covered his face with his hands and was rocking a little and was saying 'Allah. Allah, Allah. And then he knelt on his knees, raised his arms and spread his hands before him as while saying *namaaz*. There was the look of infinite pain on his face. His thin, frail eyelids rested on his eyes as if they would never open again. And moving his outstretched hands like begging alms, he murmured in Punjabi, *Rabbul Alamin*, forgive these cruel men. And, Oh Allah, Oh *Rabbah*, protect these women." (298)

Iyengar correctly remarks: "There is the residuary saving grace still, however stark the ruling situation" (Saga.171) The incidents like Gangu Mull staying back because of his property and converting into Islam and self-immolation of Niranjana Singh instead getting rid of his beard depicts how the Partition effected the minds of men/women and prompted weird and fatal behavioural changes. The novelist is unbiased in his attitude and as a sequel to Narowal parade Lala Kanshi Ram witnesses a parade of naked Muslim women in Amritsar which makes him feel detested, broken and guilty. K.K.Sharma rightly writes: "The description of the terrible slaughter of the Muslims speaks of the objectivity that Nahal maintains in recording the dreadful deeds."

The Lull in the lives of the families living in Bibi Amravati's house turns into a storm as they leave the camp of Sialkot and proceeds towards the newly formed Indian border. The convoy faced such intolerable tortures that as they approached the last Yassar the last village just before the Indian Border the people of the village made no attempt to harm the convoy. Nahal writes: The Muslims of the village were stunned by the ghastly sight of wounded and dying refugees that they forgot that all this was done in the name of Almighty Allah and the Holy Quran. Even anti-Hindu and anti- Sikh slogans were not shouted by them. The men stood astounded, as group after group of disabled, wounded or weeping and lamenting men and women turned the bend, came before them, and trudged on to whatever lay ahead of them." (320)

On reaching India Lala Kanshi ram was jubilant and he shouted *Vande Mataram* picking some soil and putting it on his forehead but Arun felt emotionless as the abduction of Chadni made him lose interest in everything. The experience of the convoy after reaching India the land they thought to be their own was very disheartening. "Not only were the arrangements inadequate to house and feed the refugees their very presence was resented by the local people" (326)

Going through continuous ordeals, a sense of fatigue takes over their soul; it does not take Lala Kanshi Ram long to realize that the minority communities on either side of the border have either been killed or turned into 'wandering gypsies'. Yet, he tries to maintain his composure and sanity. His whole attitude towards life changes, and he asserts the triumph of love and forgiveness over hatred and revenge. His argument for forgiveness is that 'what I mean is, whatever the Muslims did to us in Pakistan, we're doing it to them here' (338)

In between all the destruction and tyranny Isher Kaur, the widow of Niranjn Singh, who self-immolated himself, gave birth to a baby girl. The birth of a baby girl is a symbol of internal love and prosperity. The symbol is that of primordial mother whose benedictions knows no discrimination of caste, creed and colour. The dark clouds of greed and rapaciousness. Of envy and hatred cannot for ever hide and subdue the shining power of love.

Nahal's characters and their sufferings have not been very different from all those who were compelled to fall in the same situation on both sides of the border. They all have been through the worst that could happen to the unluckiest community as a whole. But suffering in the case of Lala Kanshi Ram and many like him have been a deep cathartic agent, purging off all baseness and meanness in them. How can one hate if one has survived only through the mercy and the benevolence of others, whether those others belong to one own's creed and community or they belong to those of the 'enemy?'

Once uprooted from their homes and hearths Lala Kanshi Ram and his family settled down in Delhi. But the sense of being homeless does not leave him. He finds himself swamped by a strange place and strange people. His problems in fact multiplied and became more agonising because these problems were no longer external but internal. The freedom which he had looked forward to with so much expectancy and eagerness seems to have belied his expectations. The bloodshed the brutality which he had come across during his journey to his 'country' had induced in him a peculiar feeling. He stopped wearing a turban, a

symbol of his dignity and respect. He lost the ability to communicate too. The long queues and the filing of petitions after petitions made him feel as if he was standing in a tunnel where he could not see the other end. (369). Senseless killings of neighbours and fellow- sufferers, looting, arson, rape; the price for *azadi* had been phenomenal.

Nahal's novel *Azadi* all the pain, sufferings, bloodshed and hatred are only a prelude to the birth of a new humanity. The forces of life are triumphant over death and decay. The novel ends on a symbolic note of continuity of life, the continuous running of the wheel of Sunanda's sewing machine stands for the wheel of time moving on, stitching with the threads of love and hate the fabric of life.

The novel portrays the brutalities of partition in the form of a war like Kurnukshetra where end brings a new dawn, similarly Chaman Nahal's projection of mass violence ends into peace and stability giving birth two new countries having new dreams and aspirations to be met and fulfilled.

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