

Rendering History through Fiction: Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* as a Record of Human Sufferings

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Abstract - Chaman Nahal weaves the narrative on the politico-cultural indices: violence, repression, misuse of religion, promotion of vested interest, mistrust, intolerance and so on. By juxtaposing the personal histories with the official versions, they vividly bring forth the complex nature of reality which does not come forth in the official versions of history.

Whereas official records, historical tracts, even memoirs of high officials describe the grand celebrations, the festive atmosphere and flag hoisting ceremonies on 15th August, the Independence Day; *Azadi* reveals the feeling of being betrayed, their anger, in no uncertain words.

Keywords - Partition, communal violence, frenzy, history and fiction, humanitarianism, rendering history of the Partition through fiction

For the most authentic portrayal and interpretation of human life, for imaginative re-creation of a tumultuous historical period, and for the urge to present 'the other side of Partition' which is not recorded in the official history, *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal stands apart in the whole range of post-colonial Indian English novel. Indeed, one learns more about the holocaust called Partition if one listens to the protagonists of the novel rather than reads historical tracts. The ordeal of the characters in *Azadi*, imparts a kind of wisdom "felt deep inside the individual in something like a visionary flash."¹

The focus of the novelist Chaman Nahal is on the years immediately preceding the Partition and he has used history for shaping their narrative. The particular advantage that he has, as compared to many other writers, is that, for him the period of Partition is not located in remote past. They have

written about contemporary history and their readers have a fair idea about the event of Partition through the collective memory and mass media.

The Partition novelists show a particular awareness and immediacy for Partition and relate the common man to existential fall-out of Partition in their narrative. Owing to the author's own experience of the communal divide, violence, arson, bloodshed and absurdity of the whole exercise of Partition, Azadi has a virility and authenticity.

The intensity of the novelist's offended feelings leads him to write against establishment and in favour of common man. He is most concerned about the existential predicament of the common man who was left with little choice to take a decision when the fast-changing human values had almost paralyzed his brain.

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Wilfred Russel, observer of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, gives his account of Independence Day celebrations, "I saw the celebrations in Karachi but from all accounts the same enthusiasm and relief were evident among all classes of people in India."² Chaman Nahal's description of 15th August is in stark contrast to the above mentioned description – "Most families in the camp sat together on that day and while they were aggrieved at their personal fate they also felt inexplicably proud." (Az., p.165)

The image of Partition that emerges through the novel is that of violence and horror. As Saros Cowasjee has observed, "The horror accompanying the transfer of population has been a major theme with Indo-Anglian writers."³ But in fact Chaman Nahal goes beyond the description of murder and arson, loot and rape and grapple with core issue of the "darker side of human nature."

Chaman Nahal, as a creative writer poses the basic question as to why man was involved in such bestial killing. What made him participate in communal frenzy? If violence during Partition was not class-based and one particular religion was not responsible for it, what were the factors that were responsible for the man-made catastrophe? The novel underlines that it is an unbelievable fact that in a highly civilised society such a holocaust had occurred.

The explanation offered by K.A. Abbas on why people were affected by communal virus and behaved like beasts is pertinent. He says, “Fear leads to hatred – hatred leads to violence of language and of temper - violence leads to mutual slaughter of the two bothers !”⁴

Though the assertions of the ‘essential humanity’, the individual acts of courage and compassion are shown by the novelist, it is also suggested that in the face of grave danger these acts of humanity are so rare as to be utterly inconsequential. Those who have good intentions usually succumb to the paralysing impact of fear. Naked terror destroys the capacity for a rational reflection. There is only hunting and being hunted, only fight and commotion, only insensate anger and infectious hysteria, only hate and in-human brutality.

As Robert Ross observes, Partition forms “a myth from which writers continue to draw again and again, there are many partitions and many treatments of partition.”⁵ Infact, *Azadi* is the only novel which has given justice to the issue of cross border migration and refugee problems, though historically these two issues are very important. Chaman Nahal graphically describes the refugee camps and foot convoy.

Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* shows that, “human kindness is man’s only hope for survival. Lala Kanshi Ram’s stoical resignations and kindness are the idealistic solution offered by Chaman Nahal.”⁶

Many Holocausts literary scholars have pointed out that an aesthetics of harmony and reconciliation and especially epic glorification of the victim’s heroism tends to make comprehensible, the absence of meaning. This observation stands correct for Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*. He has tried to imposed a form and order on the otherwise untameable turbulence of events during the Partition of the country. Through the well-developed plot, organic

structure, and the central character as the binding force, *Azadi* logically an era, in which the most illogical and absurd events took place.

Lala Kanshi Ram and Arun in *Azadi*, are shown to reconcile themselves, thus suggesting a secured future in India. The novel ends on the note of reconciliation, consolation or at least an adjustment on the part of the protagonist.

Chaman Nahal honestly admits that the violence was committed by all alike - Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs. He doesn't hold any community responsible for violence. He maintains a perfect balance on this front. It is observed that when it comes to the description of political leaders or parties, the biases of the contemporary novelists of Chaman Nahal, including himself, become explicit. Thus, whereas Gandhi is eulogised in *Azadi*, he is openly criticised by Raj Gill and parodied by Sidhwa. Both Raj Gill and Sidhwa talk in a bitter tone about Nehru.

Khushwant Singh criticises all the leaders in general through the persona of Hukum Chand. Raj Gill launches a pungent attack on the Akali leaders. What is common to all the novels is vehement criticism of the national leaders on whom the masses had full faith. Each novelist holds these men responsible for their collective treachery.

The disillusionment and betrayal of common man is well-reflected in every novel.

These biases underline the fact that literature is not a disinterested bystander. In spite of proclaimed humanism, these writers are obliged to inform where they stand. Partition novelists while writing novel are aware of the politics, of questions of nationhood and identity. Their ethnicity and national identity are manifested through their writing, implicitly or explicitly. "Thus, Rushdie makes it clear that, while he is a Muslim, he is not a Pakistani; similarly Sidhwa makes it clear that while she is a Parsi, her political identity is with Pakistan."⁷

Since personal histories of the protagonists are linked with social and national histories, *Azadi* can be read as taking place at different levels. The turmoil on the political front corresponds with the turmoil in the lives of the individuals. This technique creates a rich vignette and lends complexity to the meaning.

While focusing on the Hindu-Muslim antagonism and violence that attended, the novelist shows that in the midst of hatred are placed young lovers who defy communal discord and symbolise harmony. Nahal describes the withering away of a budding love story between Arun and Nur under gripping communal tension. Thus, it is shown that under the gripping communal tension a Hindu Muslim love-relationship is bound to fail.

Further, the forces of reparation are introduced through the younger generation marking the dawn of a new, hatred-free consciousness. In *Azadi* whereas Arun makes a new beginning by joining a college, it is difficult for Lala to sunder his roots with

Sialkot and tune to the life in Delhi.

Partition novelists have focused on polarization of identity along communal lines. They depict how a generous human being of yesterday suddenly transformed into a Hindu or Muslim during the period. Each novelist focuses on different aspects of identity.

The novel tells the story of the complex, intricate process of the formation of community based solidarities which started in the “dusty lanes and by-lanes of towns and cities and not only in the metropolitan centres; in and around the bustling vernacular newspaper offices, district courts, thanas and municipalities; or in the seemingly benign madarsas, pathshalas, mosques temples and gurudwaras.”⁸

Azadi deals with a period of history when there was a “massive shift in conceptualizing the ‘self’ and ‘the collectively’ in relation to the politically demarcated boundaries.”⁹ We find a fine portrayal of change in identity along communal lines. *Azadi* depicts how composite Punjabi culture and the regional identity disintegrates and gives way to communal identity.

A comment from an eminent critic and creative writer like O.P. Bhatnagar, criticizing Partition novelists, seems unfair – “Even on the clear cut events of the Partition the novelists have fought shy to point out the real villain. The tragedy of Partition is mellowed by the melodramatic solution and relief in the universals of non-violence and the unity of man.”¹⁰ Partition novels are creative accounts and not the reports of a ‘fact finding committee’. To blame a person or persons or a community was not at all their objective. The absurdity of the whole exercise of Partition has stirred the novelist into

critical appreciation of the politico-cultural conditions of the subcontinental man.

Azadi reveals that the novelist has done careful research into the period he has chosen, to ensure accurate portrayal of the minutest detail of historical fact. It reveals the power of imagination at work assisted by an organised knowledge of history. The structure of the novel “thus appears as a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities.”¹¹ History becomes a literary artefact in the novel.

The novel uses memory, motif and moment as the three co-relatives between the fictional world and the real world. Memory gives it framework, motif, the craft and moment gives them the locale.

Structurally, as the Partition novel *Azadi* is anchored in factual history of Partition.

Historians of Partition like K.K. Aziz, describe three stages in the movement towards Partition.¹² The first is the realisation of the gravity of the communal problem. The second is the voicing of the need for and possibility of separation and the third is the realisation of a political division. The novel shows the corresponding movement. It begins with the days of communal harmony and peaceful co-existence which are disturbed by the gradual communal divide. Then there is the description of antagonism and mutual distrust which erupts suddenly till a general realisation of the gravity of issue and the ultimate division of country. With minor variations, the same pattern is to be seen in the Partition novels like *Tamas*, *Ice-Candy-Man*, *The Rape* and *Train to Pakistan*.

Further, in *Azadi*, the structure is more specific with the division of plot in three sections namely, *The Lull*, *The Storm* and *The Aftermath*.

As Niaz Zaman observes – “For the immediate impact of Partition on creative writing one must turn not to Indo-Anglian fiction, but to Urdu writing, particularly the works of Saadat Hasan Manto.”¹³ For the most authentic portrayal of Partition many acclaimed critics have credited Manto above all other writers. No other writer has perhaps approached the bleakness and pessimism of Manto. But *Azadi's* depth of despair is comparable with that of Manto. Manto's forte was the short story which

could sustain the heightened intensity. It is difficult for a novel to sustain such high intensity of a shorter form. But the episodic nature of *Azadi*, which lends the episodes of the novel an independent existence, makes Nahal possible to focus on the dark horrors and tragic ironies which are to be found only in Manto's short stories. *Azadi* gives the bleakest and the starkest picture of Partition that reminds one of Manto.

To sum up, the foregone study reveals that the history of Partition is too important to be left to historians alone. The Partition novelists through their imaginative recreation of past and by juxtaposing personal histories by the side of national, offer us fresh insights and a better understanding of the past.

Azadi as a Partition novel affirms that the subject of Partition was first the human being - not the Hindu human being nor the Muslim, nor the Sikh – [and] the experiences of each community distinctly mirror one another, indeed reach out to and clutch at one another.

Partition bred riots and ruins. Rose Macauley once said, “No one wants ruins, but it is no use pretending that those made last night are not interesting the next day.”¹⁴

It is a fact that everyone detests ruins. Recalling Partition through memory and imagination, like recalling ruins, has indeed been an exercise detested by many. Broadcasting of tele-serial *Tamas* and the consequent turbulence has amply proved the fact. Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* proves that ruins are made informative and educative so that we can learn lessons from them.

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