

TRAUMA OF PARTITION: A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF CHAMAN NAHAL'S AZADI



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Abstract

Novels of partition narrate accounts of suffering, trauma, survival, and resistance to violence. The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 ensued several narratives written by novelists and poets as they tell the tales of people who struggled to reconstruct the definition of 'home' and belonging. The aim of partition which was to build a separate India and Pakistan, led to the destruction of both, along with rampant bloodshed on both sides as the two religions were pitted against each other. Chaman Nahal's Azadi focuses on this period in history as it tells the tale of several families in the search for a place to call their own. The novel amalgamates the essence of historical, political, autobiographical, and fictional narrative to create a narrative that portrays the horror of partition and brutality on the refugees. Nahal bases the tale in Sialkot as he narrates the tragedy of the partition and its aftermath on people who were living peacefully in a Muslim dominated community. This paper examines the tragic experiences of partition and the attempt towards assimilation and resilience.

Keywords: Partition, Refugee, Resilience, Suffering, Tragedy, Trauma, Violence.

Partition Novels – the novels that center on the tragic theme of partition of the Indian Subcontinent which happened in 1947, constitute an important sub-genre of the Indian English Novel. This event resulted in widespread violence against humanity. This unfortunate bloodbath inspired many creative writers to depict the horrors of this holocaust in their writings, films, documentaries, paintings and plays. The writers poignantly describe the suffering and pain caused due to the mass migration of refugees from both sides of the border. Page after page is filled with heart rending stories of violence, rape, abduction, torture, murder, uprootedness and pillage. The Dark Dancer, A Bend in the Ganges, Sunlight on a Broken Column, Train to Pakistan, Midnight's Children, Azadi and Ice-Candy Man are some of the most illustrious examples of the partition fiction in Indian Writing in English, exposing "an explosion of internecine violence and bloodletting".

Nahal's Azadi has rightly been called "a powerful portrayal of an individual's torment caused by the working of certain historical forces" (Bhatia 229). The novel not only exacts the hopeful dawn of Indian independence and the tragedy of the partition, the mass massacres and the vast influx of refugees, but also weaves these important historical

events within the fabric of a fictional narrative, describing the family members of Lala Kanshi Ram. Condensing the whole holocaust within the walls of Lal Kanshi Ram's Family, the author presents the whole picture through the minds of two characters, Lala Kanshi Ram and Arun, representing two different generations and two different values systems and world views. The action of the novel alternates between Lala Kanshi Ram and Arun as centers of consciousness. This method of narration helps the novelist to "dramatize the actual events" of history and use these events, facts and figures (even the historical personages) in such a way as to indicate "how man is the victim of the forces of history which he cannot control and of the passions generated by them which he cannot repress" (Mathur 92).

The novel opens with an important historical date (3 June, 1947) when Mountbatten was going to make an important announcement about the freedom of India and the partition of the Indian Sub-continent into India and Pakistan. Before this announcement is made, the great historical personages – Mountbatten, Wavell and Gandhi – are presented in the context of the novel through the raptures of Lala Kanshi Ram for whom "the false dawn of independence" was followed by "the black dance of

passions and red of bloodshed” (Mathur 82). Kanshi Ram had fallen in love with the new viceroy “the day he saw his picture in the newspaper (7) and had no love for the ‘one eyed Wavel’ with his ‘bulky frame’ and ‘baggy trousers’”. He thought that if British were to lose control over India, it would be because of the ‘ugly viceroy’ but the new viceroy Mountbatten, ‘tall and thin’, with his beautiful wife, seemed to restore a semblance of the earlier dignity. Although Lala Kanshi Ram seems to have full faith in Mountbatten, he is ambiguous in his assessment of the Congress leader:

Didn't Gandhiji and Rajaji themselves as much as offer Pakistan to Jinnah in 1944 Gandhi, by going to him, not only gave Pakistan a name, he gave Jinnah a name too (40).

He along with inhabitants of Bibi Amar Vati's two houses waits for the announcement and is stunned to hear about the partition of the county. The viceroy's announcement was followed by the appearance of Nehru who, in spite of being meek and gentle, failed to win the sympathy of the people who had gathered in the “minor- studded living room of Bibi Amar Vati” (65). These people felt a sort of betrayal on Nehru's part whom the people had taken as “a brilliant leader, a very proud leader”, and whose angry words were always regarded by the people as “the pranks of a king” (64). This, in a way, makes the novel:

An orchestration of various kinds of losses to which men and women were subjected, owing to the indecent hurry of wily politicians, to capture power and due to their inadequate preparation to meet the situation arising out of the brutal act of partition (Goyal 125-126).

Besides introducing and even exposing all the important historical personages at the outset, Chaman Nahal very artistically depicts the effects of this politico-historical decision, the partition, on the lives of common men and women: the people who “spoke a common tongue, wore identical clothes, and responded to the weather, to the heat and the first rains, in an identical manner” (54), all of a sudden became conscious of their separate religious and ethnic identities. They now became Hindus and Muslims or the majority and minority community. The Muslims of Saikot, Pakistan celebrated the creation of Pakistan by bursting crackers and taking out processions. The native Hindus of Saikot took

refuge in the refugee camps to save themselves from frenzy of violence being unleashed by the majority community i.e., the Muslims.

The most painful and humiliating effect of the partition upon the innocent people is what happens to Lal Kanshi Ram's foot convoy, in the course of their journey to Indian border. The foot convoy, guided by Lal Kanshi Ram, faces problems of more complex and bewildering nature as it passes from Gunna Kalan, Pasrur, Qila Shobha Singh, Manjoke and Narowal through “a living inferno”, as the road they take was “littered with articles, discarded turbans and female headgear, shoes, umbrellas, sticks, and cans of food” (287). Chandini, who had restored stability in Arun after he had lost Nur, is kidnapped at Narowal whereas Sunanda is defiled by Arun's collegemate, and now a Pakistani Army Officer, Captain Rahmatullah Khan who is later killed by Arun. Isher Kaur loses her husband, Niranjan Singh, who prefers to immolate himself rather than give up his religion by cutting his hair so as to escape from the fury of the Muslims. Bibi Amar Vati loses her husband, Gangu Mull, who embraces Islam to be able to become the sole proprietor of his wife's property. Innumerable men and women on both sides lose their dignity, self-respect, modesty and sanity.

In the midst of this ethnic holocaust, Nahal presents the love story of Arun and Nur, by employing the techniques of reminiscence, flashback and nostalgia: a vital feature of the postmodern historical novels, their romance and love-story is linked with the historical holocaust, when in the bitter climate of communal hatred, even their profound love for one another no longer remains personal and pure. The communal bitterness penetrates so deep in the lives of the people that close friends like Arun and Muneer too feel estranged from each other. Overwhelmed by this tension Arun and Muneer go to meet Bill Davidson – an English Sergeant who is a friend of theirs. Through Arun, Nahal presents the ideas of Bill Davidson – representing the conviction of all English officials who were serving in India before partition.

“The Indians Must arrive at their freedom slowly, they must get there by stages. They must first educate themselves to be free.... haste will lead to fragmentation” (199).

After the Partition, he openly states:

“This is the most stupid, most damaging, most negative development in the history of the freedom struggle” (122).

Meanwhile, Nahal hints at various historical references in the conversation between these two Indians and their English friend. He refers to such details from recent Indian history as the 1929 Congress Session at Lahore, the Quit India Movement of 1942, the arrival of Wavell as viceroy, the Shimla Conference of 1945, the British Cabinet Mission of 1947, the arrival of Lord Mountbatten as viceroy and the Radcliffe Boundary Commission. He mixes all these factual events of history with his own imaginative history. For examples, along with these historical details, he presents fictional tours of Gandhi to Punjab and of the Prince of Wales to Saikot which reminds of Doctorow’s Ragtime where there is a wonderful description of Freud’s visit to United States. Like Doctorow, Nahal argues that “the account of Gandhi’s tour of the Punjab and the prince of wales’ visit to Saikot, is entirely fictitious” [Author’s note] and like him, he deliberately gives a fictional turn to historical facts in order to expose those vital facts which most of the historians do not take into account.

While interpreting the historical facts, Chaman Nahal believes that the novelist cannot “lean on history”, because history for him becomes a “myth” or a “metaphor” which allows him to express his own understanding of historical fact. Nahal sounds like Doctorow who ironically called his tale “a false document” in comparison with “a true document” and believed that one’s conception of factuality depends primarily upon one’s own understanding of history. Like Doctorow, he too manipulates the past in order to create an ambiguity about his judgment regarding that era. He ironically mixes fact with fiction so as to involve the reader in the lives of the characters, without forgetting that he is dealing with the history of facts. It also helps Nahal in giving a complex turn to his narrative and in fusing together autobiographical, historical and functional. Nahal himself acknowledges the autobiographical and fictional nature of Azadi. He states: “I was born in Saikot and after 1947 we were driven away to India And till this day, I pine for the city in which I was born and raised I wrote Azadi as hymn to one’s land of birth, rather than a realistic novel of the partition” (Nahal,1985). The inner turmoil of Lal

Kanshi Ram reflects the turmoil faced by Nahal himself. His shouts, “I was born around here, this is my home...” (130), and his deep breathing which seemed like “filling his lungs with the air of the town of their utmost capacity” (312) reflects his own homesickness and also the homesickness of Nahal himself. When Prabha Rani and Arun Pack the luggage and strip the walls bare, Lala feels as if they were “stripping his flesh from his body. The bone was showing whichever way he turned” (144). Similarly, before leaving for the camp, Lala’s brooding over the entire situation and his desire for peace and prosperity represents the ultimate desires of Nahal himself. Lala is ready to “forgive the English and the Muslims for all their sins if only he could return. Return and die here and be cremated by the side of the river AIK” (48).

In spite of making Kanshi Ram his mouthpiece in the novel, Nahal retains a startling aesthetic objectivity, specifically through the portrayal of his characters. If there are such demonic creatures such as Abdul Ghani, Inayatullah Khan and Captain Rahmatullah Khan, the world also contains such enlightened beings as Bill Davidson, Chaudhri Barkat Ali and the Hakim of Narowal, the last praying to Allaha and weeping for the naked Hindu women who are being paraded in the local streets. By inventing such pathetic scenes and situations, Nahal does not violate what Robert Penn Warren has called “spirit of History” but has made history itself more ‘factual’ though, at the same time, without following mechanically the conventionally accepted norms of historian’s discipline. Whether or not his novel is “good history” does not matter because the important requirement, as Warren insisted, in that it should make “historical sense” in the thematic or symbolic way (1953: xi)

By merging fact and fiction, history and novel, autobiography and romance Nahal is able to project vividly the deeply felt tragic experiences of the people at the time of partition. Nahal’s own comment that once the novelist moves into the arena of history, he must comfort himself as a historian by showing allegiance to the documents creates a problem for the reader because of Nahal’s inventing within the frame-work of novel the romantic love stories of Arun and Nur and Arun and Chandini. By adhering fairly to his sources, and at the same time taking real liberties, as compared to

the historian, Nahal creates almost a new 'genre' in the history of India fiction.

This genre can easily be called "a documented historical novel", which Turner defines as a novel in which "the conventional distinction between history and fiction threatens to collapse for the novelist and the historian share the same event" (341). No doubt, the documented historical novelist is in a position similar to the historian; but because he is writing fiction and not history, he operates within a different set of generic conventions. To put it very simply, the difference is that the historian is supposed to restrict himself to historical events while the documented historical novelists free to fill in with imagined details the gaps in recorded history.

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