



COMMUNAL HATRED AND GENDERED VIOLENCE IN CHAMAN NAHAL'S *AZADI*

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Abstract

Partition literature holds a significant position in Indian Writing in English. Many novels have been dedicated to this historical tragedy, and while each depicts the trauma of Partition in a distinct manner, the exploitation of women and violence against their bodies remains a recurring and haunting theme. Chaman Nahal's novel *Azadi* (1975) also stands out not only for depicting the political upheaval of the era but also for its unflinching portrayal of the inhuman and barbaric violence specifically inflicted upon women. In the context of Partition literature, gendered violence was more than just a physical attack; it was employed as a strategic weapon to extract revenge from opposing religious communities. In *Azadi*, the female body effectively becomes a "battlefield" of communal struggle. This paper explores how, as violence erupted in Sialkot, Hindu and Sikh women were systematically targeted. Nahal depicts harrowing scenes where women are paraded naked in the streets and brutally raped. Such violence was not intended merely to kill the "enemy," but to break the rival community both psychologically and mentally. Women were reduced to mere commodities, and their exploitation became a means of settling scores. The proclamation of the formation of India and Pakistan resulted in the loss of countless lives, but it also saw the systematic stripping of honour from many women.

Keywords: Chaman Nahal, *Azadi*, Partition Literature, Trauma, Gendered Violence, Rape, Displacement, Communal Hatred, Refugee Crisis, Dehumanisation, Identity Crisis.

Chaman Nahal was born in 1927 in undivided India in Sialkot (now Pakistan). After the Partition of 1947, his family had to come to Delhi as refugees. His family faced individual loss and the pain of displacement, which became the main source behind his writing. He did his Masters in English from Delhi and went to England as a



British Council Scholar. He earned his PhD in English from Nottingham University in 1961. He began his career as a lecturer. He taught at the University of Rajasthan and then served as Professor at Delhi University. He also worked as a visiting professor in some reputed universities.

He wrote the Gandhi Quartet, which consists of four novels: Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), *The Crown and the Loincloth* (1981), *The Salt of Life* (1990), and *The Triumph of the Tricolour* (1993). His other novels are *My True Faces* (1973), *Into Another Dawn* (1977), and *The English Queens* (1979). He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1977 for his novel *Azadi*. He received the Federation of Indian Publishers Award twice, in 1977 and 1979. He died on 29 November 2013 in New Delhi. Chaman Nahal's novel *Azadi* has three parts: The Lull, The Storm, and The Aftermath. The novel deals with the theme of independence with a tinge of trauma.

The main character of the novel is Lala Kanshi Ram, who is an eminent grain merchant of Sialkot. Chaudhari Barkat Ali is another character of the novel. Both are close friends. Lala Kanshi Ram faces mental and social trauma due to the Partition. He remembers the days when Barkat Ali and Kanshi Ram were good friends. They never considered themselves separate and lived with full harmony. The novel narrates how Lala Kanshi Ram was much disturbed to see the consequences of the Partition. He knew if a new nation came into existence, he would have to leave his property.

Kanshi Ram's wife Prabha Rani has a sober nature. Through her character, Chaman Nahal has depicted the pain of displacement and trauma of gendered violence in her family. Lala Kanshi Ram loves his wife. In his old age, he still gets lost in old memories and her physical charm. In the novel, through flashbacks, their intimate moments and Prabha Rani's physical beauty are described. Chaman Nahal compares Prabha's beauty with another character, Isher Kaur. He reaches new heights in describing sensuality while comparing the physical stature of Isher Kaur. Isher Kaur has been depicted as soft with "salty" eyes, symbolising a more destructive sensuality. Prabha Rani says that if Pakistan becomes a new country, they will have to leave their property behind, even if the Muslims spare their lives. For an Indian woman like Prabha Rani, her house is her world. Having to leave her house, kitchen, and memories is a fatal experience for her. When her daughter and son-in-law are killed in the train massacre,



Prabha Rani breaks down completely. She becomes like a living corpse, constantly cursing herself and her fate for this violence.

As the declaration of independence is made and the Viceroy's speech is broadcast on the radio, the Indian Partition is declared. Nehru's desperate voice and then Jinnah's slogan of "Pakistan Zindabad" are heard on the radio. With this news, the Muslims start celebrating, while the Hindus and the Sikhs are cowering in fear of riots. The whole environment becomes tensed, and the threat of an attack on Lala Kanshi Ram's street increases. Many Muslims come into the streets shouting 'Allah-o-Akbar' and carrying weapons. With this, the mental condition of the Hindus worsens. Finally, the situation becomes normal with the intervention of British officials, but fear remains deep in their hearts as they see death before their eyes.

Arun's carnal desire becomes explosive. Here, the storm is a symbol not only of riots but also of Arun's physical demands and carnal desires. After parting with Nur, Arun becomes explosive regarding his sexual desires. Even after the death of his sister Madhu Bala, he looks for opportunities to quench his thirst in the camp. He gets attracted toward Chandni, the daughter of a sweeper named Padmini. Arun proposes to Chandni, and Nahal depicts that sexuality is a natural process of human nature, a fire that does not diminish even during tragic times. Chaman Nahal also writes about Padmini's beauty, "A faded beauty of a very delicate type" (68). She is forty-year-old still has a charming body.

After the death of his sister, Arun has come to know about the fragility of life. He still holds an optimistic point of view, "The continuity of life... the continuity of the will in the being of things... an urge for survival, for self-assertion" (200). After the violence and due to the trauma, he has become mature. He has come to know that there is no guarantee for anything in life. He is no longer afraid about his future or safety now: "Growing up too fast, shedding his past too fast... no longer afraid for himself... asking too many sureties from life does not really help" (220). He sees his life like a new birth after Partition; he is now "determined to emerge different, modified, reborn in the changed environment" (226). Arun's mother sees a dramatic change in his personality. Chaman Nahal writes about it, "An adult longing in his voice... a steely, decisive ring about it" (234). The novelist has depicted the trauma of the loss of Chandni. Chaman Nahal writes about him, "Unhealthy, sickly, demented frenzy" (319).



Arun is not able to forget her. She was not only a beloved; rather, she had become a part of his existence: "Chandni does indeed become his second self" (358).

Bibi Amar Vati, Arun's grandmother, represents the worry and terror that women experienced during the Partition. Her ongoing concern for the security of her family and her own vulnerability draws attention to the gendered aspects of psychological trauma. The book portrays her inner fortitude and resilience as well as her ingrained worry and dread, which are made worse by the possibility of sexual assault and the loss of her home. Being the matriarch of the family and having to look out for her loved ones in the midst of upheaval adds to Bibi Amar Vati's pain.

The first riot took place in Sialkot on the twenty-fourth of June. Many city of the Punjab had been aflame for months; there were large scale killings and looting in Lahore, Gujarat, Gujranwala, Amritsar, Ambala, Jullundur, Rawalpindi, Multan, Ludhiana, and Sargodha. (Nahal 108)

The novel shows the deep-rooted relationships between two close friends. Barkat Ali was a good Muslim who would frequently visit Lala Kanshi Ram's house, stay in the kitchen, and talk to his friend's wife like a family member, asking, "Now sister-in-law, how are you? But first tell me what is there to drink" (99). In this way, the Partition built a wall between brothers.

After the tragic death of his daughter, Madhu, Lala Kanshi Ram is badly broken and he becomes a "shattered psyche" (205). For Kanshi Ram, Partition is not only a line on the map; it is the uprooting of his roots. He does not only leave his city but also his identity. In the city they once considered their own, they became strangers and refugees overnight. They are forced to leave their property, home, and social prestige, which creates a deep psychological trauma. Chaman Nahal has depicted the barbarity during Partition without any filters. He writes about the attacks on the train, murders, and the scenes of corpses scattered on the streets, showing the horror of trauma. After Partition, when Lala Kanshi Ram reaches Delhi, he is totally transformed. He does not hate anyone because he has seen that the violence has turned humans on both sides into animals. After reaching Delhi, he is feeling unsafe and mentally tired, "So exposed, so naked, so defenceless... lost and hurt and confused... a weariness of the spirit" (346, 349, 350). His journey from being a proud resident of Sialkot to a homeless refugee is



marked by deep mental agony. Through Lala Kanshi Ram's character, Chaman Nahal depicts the dilemma of a common citizen of colonial India. "His attitude towards the British Raj is marked with an element of ambiguity" (117). On one hand, Lala Kanshi Ram is moved by the patriotic slogans and desires independence for his country; however, on the other hand, he admires the systemic order of the British administration. He is particularly fond of their grand pageants (processions) and the sense of safety provided by the British Raj. This highlights a significant contradiction in his character.

This novel narrates the theme of dehumanisation. Even neighbours become enemies. The novelist has depicted the violence on women's bodies; women were raped, exploited, and murdered during the Partition. Chaman Nahal has depicted the death of Lala Kanshi Ram's daughter, Madhu, and other women.

The novel also highlights the history of good Hindu-Muslim relationships. Abdul Ghani's shop was within Lala Kanshi Ram's store—a single almirah built into the wall served as his shop—yet he received full respect from his neighbours. If he needed money, Lala Kanshi Ram offered it to him without any doubt about whether Ghani would return it. They spoke one language, wore similar clothes, and responded equally to every season.

"So there was utter harmony among them, and the fact that Ghani was a Muslim and Lala Kanshi Ram a high-caste Hindu never entered their heads. They spoke a common tongue, wore identical clothes and responded to the weather, to the heat and the first rains in an identical manner" (54).

Hindus were comfortable with Urdu, even though their own language was Hindi. It was the first language they learned to read and write. Lala Kanshi Ram used Urdu for his shop ledger and correspondence. Furthermore, Muslims participated in Hindu festivals; the large effigies for Dussehra were made by Muslim workmen. Chaman Nahal writes that they were so deeply integrated in every part of the country that separating them was a difficult task.

Arun, Lala Kanshi Ram's only son, is a twenty-year-old college student who closely follows the daily activities leading to independence. He is an open-minded boy who does not believe in man-made caste and creed systems; he believes in the universal nature of love. He is secretly in love with Chaudhari Barkat Ali's daughter, Nurul-Nisar, and proposes marriage. She asks if he will embrace Islam for her, and he replies that he is ready to embrace



death, let alone Islam, for her. He is ready to change himself, "What was Islam anyway? Seen as faith it was as good as any, seen as intellectual enquiry it was as superstitious and wanting. If by switching a few rituals he could hold Nur next to him in bed every night..." (96).

Later, he asks why she should not become a Hindu, a question that leaves Nur stunned. They meet at secluded spots on the college campus. Arun is also a close friend of Nur's brother, Munir, who is also open-minded. Munir does not resist their relationship and instead protects their love by suggesting safe meeting places. While Munir does not participate in violence, he is filled with guilt when he sees men of his community attacking Hindus. Through Munir, the novelist depicts the mental trauma of witnessing wrongdoing.

Arun and Nur's love is depicted beautifully; they become very intimate in a graveyard when they are alone. They plan for their future, but their love story dies during the riots that break out in Sialkot on 24 June. The whole city burns, many Hindus and Sikhs are brutally killed, and women are tortured. An English sergeant, Bill Davidson, eventually takes Kanshi Ram and other families to refugee camps. Vitthal A. Ugemuge writes "Communal Harmony in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi: A Study*," "In brief, *Azadi* presents the partition-politics in a right perspective. Nahal does not raise any accusing finger towards any political party or a group of individuals for the unfortunate event of the partition of the country" (3).

Nahal writes that even during the violence, Lala Kanshi Ram and Chaudhari Barkat Ali remain friends. However, for the younger generation represented by Arun, Partition changes life completely. Their love is sacrificed to communalism, which is the biggest trauma for them. Seeing corpses and the humiliation of women makes Arun prematurely serious and sad.

It was not only a physical injury but the end of the respect and mental peace of the whole family. The novelist shows how the loss of family members changes the entire course of life. Earlier, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs lived together, but after Partition, Kanshi Ram sees his former friends become bloodthirsty enemies. This scene represents the tragic collapse of the "social fabric." The loss of trust is one of the biggest traumas of Partition. When they reach India, instead of celebrating independence, they have to live in refugee camps. Living in unhygienic conditions and standing in lines feels like a mental death. It is a profound trauma for a rich man to become



a refugee who has neither home nor food. He loses faith in the system. Nahal depicts that the price of freedom was paid by those who lost everything.

Bibi Amar Vati is the matriarch and an elderly character who represents the deep-seated fear of women. Through her character, Chaman Nahal has depicted psychological trauma. She is deeply concerned about the safety of her daughter-in-law, Sunanda, and other women. For her, the loss of her house is not merely a loss of property, but the destruction of that safe haven which provides security to a woman. Her anxiety and worry reinforce the fact that during the Partition, the most dangerous threat to women was the loss of their honour.

The novelist also depicts the cruel side of sexuality through Captain Rahmat-Ullah of the Pakistani army, who lusts after Sunanda, the daughter-in-law of Bibi Amar Vati. Arun admires her beauty but views her as a sister. Captain Rahmat-Ullah misuses his power to kidnap and rape Sunanda. Through this character, Chaman Nahal attempts to show how uniforms and armed power gave men a license to commit atrocities against women. Arun eventually kills the Captain in order to take revenge, which illustrates how the cycle of violence continues. The novel shows that during Partition, those who were already vulnerable, like Chandni (the daughter of the sweeper Padmini), suffered the most. She is eventually arrested by Muslims on the journey to India, illustrating the tragic fate of the marginalised during the upheaval. This novel reminds us that the price of independence was paid by those women who sacrificed their honour and lives, even though they had no connection to politics. Chaman Nahal's novel serves as a reminder of the displacement, rape, and psychological trauma that remain alive in the memories of the displaced. Ian Ousby writes in his book *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, "His most considerable novel, *Azadi*, describes Hindu, Muslim and Sikh living together peacefully in the Punjab until Partition turned neighbours into enemies, citizens into fugitives" (Ousby 704).



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