

Revisiting the terror of Partition: A critical reading of Chaman Nahal's "Azadi" and Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan"

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Abstract

The Partition of India (1947) is a far reaching and well-debated historical event, which gave birth to a huge bulk of academic, historical and literary discourse. It is considered to be source of an enormous socio-political complexes that still remains as a cancerous wound in the life of the millions of the inhabitants of the Subcontinent. The Partition Literature too, is a fascinating and expanding horizon, that found a distinctive place in South Asian literature. Several novelists and renowned writers have dealt with the horror, chaos, and communal unrest, that raised during and after the Partition on the basis of religion. These novelists foregrounded the tragic holocaust of this accursed and turbulent historical phase. Among them, Chaman Nahal and Khushwant Singh are two towering personalities, who project the terror and agonizing events of Partition, along with the disastrous experiences of displacement and crisis of the common man and the marginalized refugees. In this article, I will focus upon the terror of Partition and the plight of the displaced refugees, who were the worst victims of this sinister turn of history. The present paper also seeks to discuss the fictionalized rendering of the tragic massacre the made an indelible impression in the lives of the people during and after the disaster. I will substantiate my argument by analyzing the texts of Chaman Nahal's "Azadi", and Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan".

KEYWORDS: Partition, Post-Colonial, Communalism, Holocaust, Broder, Violence, Displacement.

The Indian partition 1947 is a massive historical event and a stupendous socio-political and cultural transformation, that unmakes and remakes the lives of millions in the complex process of displacement, destabilization, and relocation. The trauma and agony of partition along with the communal disharmony and tumultuous socio-historical upheavals have engaged immense literary and critical attention, resulting in the origin and development of a vast and distinctive literary genre. Poets, writers and the novelists have either projected their firsthand experiences of the agonizing journey of partition, or thrown into the prolonged critical debate in the complex area. Ranging from Manohar Malgonkar to Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, writers and novelists have epitomized partition and the subsequent disasters in their intensely poignant narratives in the previous decades. Hence, partition literature has gradually increased its panorama and scope of exploration, offering the scholars and academicians multiple shades of critical enquiry.

Among the Partition novelists, Chaman Nahal and Khushwant Singh are the most powerful writers who dealt with the terrifying events of partition and its aftermath in dramatically realistic and penetrating narratives. They focused upon the communal violence, plunder, rape, mass atrocities and merciless bloodshed, before during and after the partition. In the present article, I will offer an analytical study of Chaman

Nahal's representative novel *Azadi* and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* to substantiate my discussion. The present article will also focus upon certain aspects of the two texts in course of my critical study.

In keeping with the trends of Partition literature set by MonoharMalgonkar in his *A Bend in the Ganges* and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Chaman Nahal patterns his 'Gandhi Quartet' around the blackened episode of Partition and the concomitant violence, loot, massacre and communal disharmony of these four books, *Azadi*(1975) has penetratingly arrested critical attention and fascinated the critics and readers to read and re-read it; once, twice and thrice. The first noteworthy thing to note, is the novelist's commitment to depict the endless suffering of a dispossessed individual, who narrates the terrifying and tortuous experience with profound human sympathy and sincerity. The first thing that distinctively comes to my exploratory reading is inherent irony and poignant satire of its title. The word *azadi* is used to denote the intrinsic worthlessness and deceptive futility of our so called *azadi*. The narrative thus interrogates the significance of our so-called independence, which ultimately bifurcates the Subcontinent on the ground of religion. The novel is often interpreted as Nahal's autobiography as a rootless refugee, who is compelled to abandon his birthplace due to the enormous political pressure of the Partition and, embarks on a journey into a future that is uncertain, complex and traumatic. Nahal projects himself in the figure of Lala Kanshiram, the protagonist of the novel. His narrative at once, is a poignant account of a helpless refugee, and a story of resistance and voiceless protest against the political stupidity of our nation leaders and the British Government. Nahal's narrative dramatizes the crisis and the ruthless massacre, that ransacked the border districts, disrupting their age-old harmony, peace and solidarity.

The story begins at Sialkot and ends in Delhi. Though the novelist adds imaginative flavour to the realistic historical events, yet he depicts with utmost sincerity the plight of the tortured Hindus in the Muslim populated towns and cities and misery of the Muslims in the Hindu populated districts. Nahal manoeuvres the text with dexterity and sincerity that captivates readers' attention from the first page to the last.

As Nahal in his novel presents the horror of bloodshed and agony of Partition in a pessimistically ironic light and with ground realism, he challenges and mocks at those writers and historians, who dealt with the independence, in a spirit of celebration and national glory. Chaman Nahal as the native son of united India reflects the Indian ethos with all its plausibly realistic elements. In Chaman Nahal's novel, India is represented in its real flesh and blood character, colour and spirit. his works in general, and *Azadi* in particular, through the graphic description of the terror and violence during Partition, projects India at the threshold of a new era of a national structure and a critical juncture, when faith and age old harmonious coexistence between Hindus and the Muslims was gradually crumbling into doubt, hatred, and tragic enmity. "The Seattle Time" of U.S.A., aptly comments in reference to Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* :

"Here is India. India colourfully,

penetratingly, amusingly...

No one but an Indian could have written his
book and not many Indians would do it,

As well as Chaman Nahal."

14th/15th August 1947 is a significant land mark in the history of colonial India because our country obtained the so called independents. As the clock strikes twelve in the midnight of 14th August, the entire country burst into thunderous rejoice and the history of the subcontinent enters a new epoch. The country was reworded the independence as the British decided to quit India, but not before bifurcating the united subcontinent into India and Pakistan on the basis of religion. It was a result of a prolonged negotiation between Jinnah, Nehru and Gandhi on the one hand, and the representatives of the British rulers on the other. The situation was aggravated with the arrival of 'Cripse Mission' and the conspiracy comes full circle with the appointment of Lord Mountbatten as the Viceroy of India.

The partition strikes a heavy blow to the spirit of tolerance, brotherhood and solidarity that enabled the Hindus and the Muslims to have a peacefully harmonious social existence since antiquity. It also proclaims the death knell of the traditional set up of indigenous culture based on communal harmony and religious tolerance. Chaman Nahal's fiction focuses on the seamy sides of the partition and the dark side of the coin. The protagonist of his novel is an inhabitant of Sialkot and is the worst victim of the violence, tension and ravages that followed the partition. The novel registers the tragic career of Lala Kanshi Ram who begins as a settled inhabitant of Sialkot, a border town (Now in Pakistan) and ends, a rootless destitute in a refugee camp: terribly shaken and tormented by the destruction of communal harmony, faith and tolerance, uprooted and deprived of all by the tempest of violence, plunder and atrocity among the fanatics which sweeps the members of two communities light years away from each other. Lala Kanshi Ram's poignant story constitutes a metaphorically downward journey which is realistic as well as symbolic. Chaman Nahal projects his own disapproval of India's partition through the tragedy of Lala Kanshi Ram and the people like him as well as with the response that the protagonist and his young son Arun offer here and there in the story.

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* is a novel of the author's *Gandhi Quartet* that depicts the intensely traumatic experience that the people of north-western boarder of India around 1947. The poignant story of dislocation, plunder, assault on women and other brutal experiences make this novel a powerful protest against the inhuman activities of the religious fanatic. The work demonstrates Nahal's insight into the negative aspects of this complex problem of partition. Progress of the narrative, along with the constrainous journey of the protagonist, charts the plight and endless misery of a thousands of homeless refugees and uprooted marginals. Mohan Jha in his article "*Chaman Nahal's Azadi: A Search for Identity*" comments:

Azadi is, indeed, full of suspense and excitement, morbid silences and frightening noises, of graphic descriptions of human indignity and brutality. And though in this drama of mass murders and mass rapes, large-scale abductions and parades of nude women we encounter a number of characters, the one character who stands far above anybody else is Lala Kanshi Ram. In fact, there are only two characters in the novel, Lala Kanshi Ram and Arun, who deserve, even command, a close and detailed consideration. (G.S. Balarama Gupta Ed., 1987, p-38)

The central protagonist of *Azadi*, Lala Kanshi Ram, represents not only the sufferings and endless misery of the refugees of Partition but also stands in the story as a silent yet powerful protest against the satanic cunning, fraud and guile of our policy makers. His story becomes a burning symbol of the fire that was fanned across the border during and after Partition. Nahal depicts Lala Kanshi Ram and his tragic journey with intense human pathos and sincere commitment of a fellow sufferer. Thus

the novel like Manohar Malgonker's *ABent in the Ganges*, epitomizes the cancerous wounds of Partition of the Indian Subcontinent. the Partition is one of the most debated issue in the political history of our country, but Nahal, instead of engaging into any such debate and ambiguity, deals with the plausibly realistic holocaust of the disastrous consequences and the atrocities, that left a permanent sense of Shame and trauma in the Indian Psyche. Through the endless sufferings of the central character and his family, the novelist articulates the voice of the voiceless marginals, the silenced sufferers on whom history has worked havoc. Nahal depicts various facets of Lala Kanshi Ram's journey with a great subtlety and psychological insight. In each stage the protagonist finds himself at a crisis which tests his nerves and contributes to his progressive disintegration. His, is a journey from hope to despair, from happiness to misery, from peace and order to anarchy and unsettlement. As I have mentioned earlier, the novel is full of autobiographical element, and reflects the author's tragic journey from his native place to a land of uncertainty and alienation, Kanshi Ram like his creator and million others was trapped in the complex whirlpool of history that swept him apart and the agonizing nightmare of communal violence that made him friendless, penniless, a scattered refugee staggering from camp to camp in search of an answer to his vexed question is this doing any good for us. He ultimately ends as an indifferent stoic whom grief can no longer move into tears. He interrogates the evil political mechanism that remains behind the bifurcation of the subcontinent, at the cost of thousands of innocent lives and honor of women and dislocation of the common men across the border.

The narrative shifts from one place to other in correspondence with the journey that the protagonist undergoes. Lala Kanshi Ram's family lived in Sialkot before Partition along with seven other Hindu families in the atmosphere of peace, harmony and solidarity between the Hindu and the Muslims. Chaman Nahal depicts the days before Partition through the ambience of brotherhood and fellow feelings between the members of two communities with artistic sincerity and lucid style of storytelling. Lala Kanshi Ram and Chowdhury Barkat Ali were intimate friends and the former a devout worshiper of Gandhian principal of communal harmony and nonviolence, considers the later to be his brother. Lala Kanshi Ram's son Arun was in friendship with the daughter of Chowdhury Barkat Ali. Partition not only multiplied the misery of these innocent people, but also cruelly severs the emotional bond between the young lovers and friends on the pretext of their religious differences. Hence, these marginalized people find themselves helpless, before such vast historical upheaval and political transformation.

Nahal, instead of engaging himself into any debate on the most tumultuous phase of history, projects and foregrounds the real horror of Partition and the disastrous effects, it brought in the lives of thousands of disempowered marginals, like his protagonist Lala Kanshiram. Kanshiram with his practical wisdom, realizes and expresses his premonition over the evil consequences of Partition, which would make the lives of millions of Hindus, Muslims and Sheikhs miserable. "The Viceroy spoke in a clipped, sharp accent and even this non-English speaking audience could sense the emotion behind what he was saying. He was soon finished and all eyes turned first towards Suraj Prakash (since he was older of the two), who knew some English and when he threw up his hands in despair and shook his head...Arun had understood it all only too well and in a shaken voice he said "Partition", and made a gesture with his hands of chopping a thing in two."(p.57). This reminds us of a similar ambivalent, yet emotionally powerful response in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* where Lenny and

her cousin are sitting by the side of a radio and listens Jinnah's voice declaring the birth of a new constitution for Pakistan and celebrating the origin of the new nations:

"You are free. You are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in the state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste, or creed, that has nothing to do with the business of State...etc..etc..etc. Pakistan Zindabad. (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, p-144). Nahal's oratorical ability and artistic craftsmanship is noteworthy here. He conveys the disconcertingly shocking effect and emotional whirlpool into which Lala Kanshi Ram and his neighbours find themselves. In the midst of this troubled period of turmoil and unrest, the only redeeming force is the love and friendship, like Arun's attachment to Nurul, and Kanshiram's friendship with his liberal muslim neighbour Chaudhuri Barkat Ali.

Nahal's implicit, yet central message is clear, that the most terrible blow of Partition is the estrangement and demolition of former belief and harmonious brotherhood between the Hindus, Muslims and the Sheikhs. Nahal wonderfully depicts the inner transformation of Kanshi Ram from an enthusiastically optimistic patriot into a sombre pessimistic philosopher, withdrawn into his inner world and brooding upon the mercilessness and inhuman atrocity. The novelist, like his protagonist found themselves broken-hearted to ponder over the loss of faith and solidarity between the members of two religion, who lived in an atmosphere of love, amity and cooperation for many centuries. Thus, the protagonist and his family find themselves confronting with different set of terrifying and tragic experiences in different phase of their journey from their native Sialkot to the refugee camp in Delhi.

The next part of my discussion will focus upon another powerful representation of the trauma of Partition, in Khushwant Sing's 1956 novel "Train to Pakistan". Like Chaman Nahal, Sing too, delves deep into the historical reality of the Partition of 1947 and contextualizes it with the greater Socio-political complexes that result after the tragic historical disaster. Sing's novel like his contemporary partition novelists, unfolds his narrative against the fiery background of the Partition of the Subcontinent. His novel "Train to Pakistan" is read as a poignant, penetrating and engagingly realistic projection of the terror of Partition within the entire range of South Asian Partition Literature. Sing foregrounds the unforeseen disaster, violence, communal hatred, rape and mass atrocities, that the division of the country brought about across the border. Singh's novel is viewed as a iconic text on the theme of Partition, as the narrative records the human impact of Partition. The critics and commentators have praised the novel for its plausibly realistic representation of the terror of Partition, even the subsequent authors who themselves wrote on the theme of Partition, have also accepted the text as the page setter in the genre. Salman Rushdie for instance praised it as 'the only good book on the theme [of Partition]', while Amitav Ghosh has acknowledged it as 'a classic'.

The narrative is centered around an imaginary village in the north-western front, called Manomajra, populated by the Sheikhs, Muslims and a single Hindu family. They lived in an ambience of peace, harmony and religious tolerance. Their daily life was patterned by the movement and whistles of trains from morning to night. The people of Manomajra are the simple unpolitical villagers, unaware of the grater political turmoil, preceding the Partition of 1947, are all on a sudden awakened into the historical and political unrest. Cut off from the complex and stormy world outside, their simple village life is controlled by the schedule of the train whistle from morn to night. At the dawn, the Lahore bound train makes the Mulla aware of the morning prayer, and the "Azan" awakes the Sheikhs of their morning ritual.

The initial reaction of the inhabitants of the Manomajra towards the unprecedented violence and terror is that of overwhelming astonishment, bewilderment, and shock, which gradually transformed into grief, faithlessness and disillusionment. The narrative records the terrible impact with intense human appeal. The story opens against the backdrop of an unusually prolonged summer of 1947. The villagers were desperately yearning for the first drop of rain to get rid of the scorching heat and burning sun.

The narrative begins with a sudden midnight robbery at the house of the only Hindu inhabitant at Manomajra Lala Ramlal, who is a moneylender. The murderers were a Gang of Malli. Jugga

and Iqbal, they both were arrested for the one same murder they did not commit. This robbery and murder of Lala Ramlal breaks the old of harmony and peaceful co-existence of the Hindu Muslim and the Sheikhs in the town. When they were released from the jail, they heard the news that, a gang of religious fanatics and gang of riffians are about to attack a train, carrying Muslims to Lahore from this side of the border. Humanity awakes, and Jugga and Iqbal decide to save the lives of their Muslim neighbours, even at the risk of their own lives. Crisis and fellow feelings transforms these local young men to come forward to the rescue of the helpless migrants, who are the victims of an unforeseen religious and political metamorphosis.

The people of different religious share certain relics and holy things, as their common heritage, such as the "large peepul tree" in the village, which symbolizes the communal harmony and solidarity, prevalent in India since antiquity. Like Chaman Nahal and other Partition novelists, Khushwant Singh too, emphasizes on the indigenous cultural unity and cooperation in the divided Subcontinent, as well as relives on the turbulent episode of terror, violence and misery during and after the partition. The central imagery of the text is the train, that remains the prime regulatory force in an otherwise monotonous lives of Manomajra. Khushwant Singh unfolds his story against the backdrop of the unusual passage of the train across the river bridge. One day, a train comes full of dead Sikhs. Some days later the same thing happens again, and the village became a battlefield of conflicting loyalties and neither magistrate nor police can stem the rising tide of violence.

They villagers of different religion, no longer believe each other, and the venom of doubt confusion and chaos begin to reign supreme in the border towns and villages from now on. Before the eviction of the Muslims inhabitants of the village and forcing them to an uncertain future, Chacha Imam Baks, comes to the Sikh assembly, and in a state of utter bewilderment, asks, whether they will allow his family and the Muslim villagers of Manomajra to stay their as before. But his hope for a warm and brotherly response soon turns into utter disappointment. They say: Yes, you are our brothers. As far as we concerned, you and your children and your grandchildren can live here as long as you like...But Chacha, we are so few and the strangers coming from Pakistan are coming in thousands. Who will be responsible for what we do? (p:91). Singh's narrative foregrounds such poignant stories, that happened in all the border towns and villages before and after the Partition. It is the troubled period, when the inter-religious harmony and solidarity crumbled into intolerance, confusion, doubt and trustlessness. Imam, like Lala Kanshiram in "Azadi", accepts this terrible blow of fate, but his daughter Nooran, could not. She refuses to leave the place of her origin, where She has grown up amidst an atmosphere of love, friendship and unity among the villagers of both the Muslims and the Sikhs. In spite of her vehement assertion, Nooran and the others could not escape or alter what the destiny had in store for them.

The simple farmyard dwellers of Manomajra, were ignorant of the cataclysm and socio-historical holocaust of Partition, and “Independence”, had nothing to do with their day to day life, full of toil and rest.

One midnight, when the entire village were in deep sleep, a band of ruffians stiltily entered the village, and attacked the house of the only Hindu inhabitant Lala Ramlal and the threatened the villagers with the trauma of an unforeseen disaster. Even the secret meeting and love making between Juggut and Nooran, is scared by the hitherto unexperienced terror of murder and violence in their village. Freeing herself from the embrace of Juggat, frightened Nooran utters: “she said nervously, trying to keep Juggut Singh from renewing his lovemaking. 'Wasn't it from the village?’

'I don't know. Why are you trying to run away? It is all quiet now.' Juggut Singh pulled her down beside him.

'This is no time for jesting. There is murder in the village. My father will get up and want to know where I have gone. I must get back at once.’ Singh:p(19). Their relation is also in a state of crisis, as terrified Nooran refuses to meet Juggut any longer, “She was saying so: 'I will never come to see you again. If Allah forgives me this time, I will never do it again.’”: P(20).

Various issues and serious questions are incorporated within the richly textured narrative. The characters in the novel, grapple with the question of moralities throughout the novel. For the simple villagers of Manomajra, moralities mean nothing but loyalties to a particular idea or belief. For Meet Singh, the Europeans have no religious allegiance and hence, they have no moral qualms. The characters of Jugga and Iqbal are also torn between the conflicting moralities, prevalent in Manomajra. The deeprooted beliefs and ideas of the illiterate villagers are almost distant to the alien like Iqbal Singh. He attempts to inspire the villagers with his Marxist egalitarian ideas. Though Jugga and Iqbal are unconventional in their attitude to life and society, yet the former proves to be superior at the end. Jugga, inspite of his ignorance of the complex socio-political outcome of the Partition, sacrifices his life for the rescue of his beloved Nooran, and the Muslim neighbours of Manomajra, who were being transported to Pakistan as refugees. The conflicting morality is also evident in the character of the magistrate Hukumchand between his duty as a local official and as a humanbeing to save the lives of his friends and villagers in distress.

Like Nahal , Singh too adeptly depicts the horror of Partition, the lull, the storm and the aftermath. As the former deals with the tragic saga of Partition, so does the later, delves deep into the enormity of the brutality of communal violence, that ensues the arbitrary division of the country, through the tormenting experiences of the inhabitants of Manomajra. In both the texts, the love and romantic attachment between young lovers of two religion emerges as a redemptive force, that evokes the healing power of love and humanity. As is the affair between Juggat Singh and Nooran in “Train to Pakistan”, so is the relation between Arun, Kanshiram’s son and the Nurul Nissar, the daughter of Barkat Ali, a Muslim girl, who are studying in the same college. The former takes the risk of sacrificing his life to save his love, but in case of arun and Nurul, they are separated by the sudden imposition of border between India and Pakistan on the basis of religion. Thus, the stormy disaster of Partition worked havok in the lives of common man: friends becoming foe, lovers becoming aliens. At one point in the “Azadi”, both Arun and Nurul insist each other

to convert their religion as the Partition would inevitably lead to their separation, on account of their religious difference. Nahal writes: He heard himself say:

„Why should I become a Muslim?“

He was harsh in his voice, as if it was Nur who had created the new states.

„Why shouldn't you? That is, if you love me.“

It sounded like anger, but she was only pleading. Arun was cruel to her:

„Why shouldn't you become a Hindu?“

For a while Nur was stunned. She looked at him in anger, her passive,

pleading eyes lit up with fire. (78) Thus, Chaman Nahal skilfully delineates the emotional crisis and psychological dilemma in the minds of the helpless young lovers. They intended to maintain their relation, even at the outbreak of riot and communal frenzy, but not willing to convert their religion. Hence, both the novelists dexterously foreground the terrifying effects of partition, with all its bloodcurdling and tragic incidents.

“Partition Literature” is a complex and fascinating genre within the postcolonial writings. Its expanding horizon focuses upon various shades of this disastrous historical event. The genre draws attention of the critics and literary commentators for last few decades to throw light on divergent issues relating to the partition of the Subcontinent, along with its multilayered socio-political connotations. Amongst the area, the two works, that I have discussed in this article, are considered as canonical texts. They represent the agonising experiences of the terror of Partition, and its tragic consequences, with different perspectives. They are representative records, as they attempt to articulate the silenced misery by illuminating the other faces of freedom. They also bring into interrogation, the futility and irony behind the political controversy regarding partition. Both the texts deal with the stories of displacement, dislocation and misery of the common man. The novelists throw light on the sombre and ironic fact that those who expressed their faith in the nationalist and political leaders and British government, were terribly shaken by the holocaust of partition and communal hatred, as Kanshiram in “Azadi” and magistrate Hukumchand in “Train to Pakistan”. To conclude, it may be argued that, both Chaman Nahal and Khushwant Singh left their contributions, in the field of partition novels with heartrending and poignant narratives of struggling people in the face of an enormous historical crisis, setting the fortified platform for the subsequent Diasporic novelists like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, who incorporate newer ways of looking into this vibrant literary and historical discourse.

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