

The Criterion

December 2012

ISSN 0976-8165

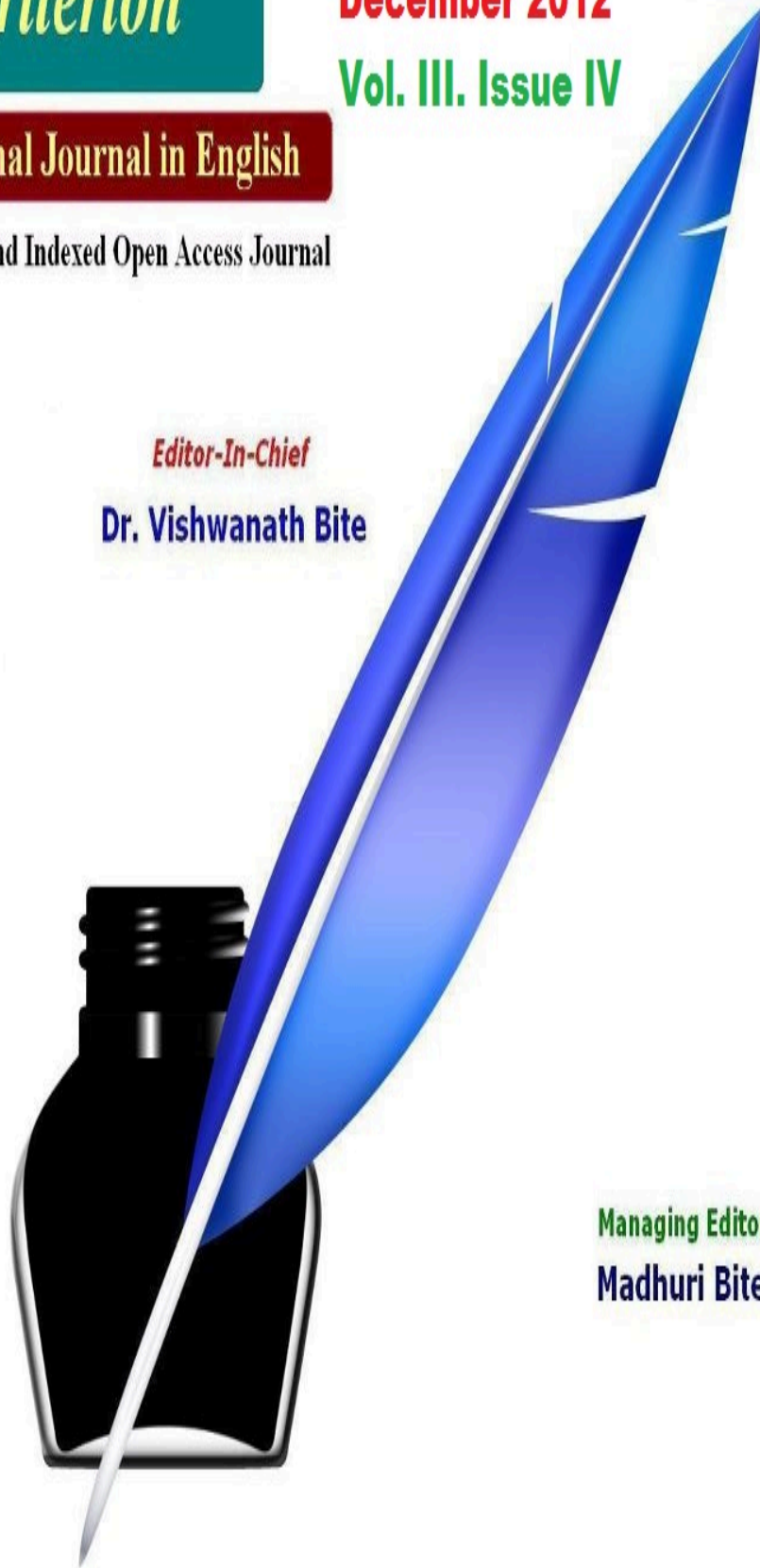
Vol. III. Issue IV

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

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The Partition and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*

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The amputation of the Indian sub-continent into two countries on religious grounds in August 1947 turned out to be one of the bloodiest upheavals witnessed by Indian history. Although the Indians achieved independence from the British rule, yet they had to pay dearly for it. The violent consequences of the partition in the form of genocide and mass rapes shook the conscience of man everywhere. Humanism was replaced by barbarism, and human beings were transformed into beasts, thirsting for blood. In fact, the partition that resulted in the massacre of not less than two million people was not only tragic but also agonizing as it was a manmade and not a natural calamity. It was ironic that people, who had fought hand in hand against the British and had together raised their voices in favour of a free India, suddenly turned against each other, and millions of people were forced to become paupers and refugees overnight. Men, women and children were ruthlessly murdered and trains crossed the border carrying dead bodies instead of passengers.

Recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award, Chaman Nahal who is believed to give the most comprehensive treatment to the subject till date, has significantly contributed to the literature on partition by writing his 'magnum opus' *Azadi*. Elucidating the journey of its protagonist, Lala Kanshi Ram and his family from Sialkot in West Punjab (now in Pakistan) to Delhi after the announcement of the partition, accompanied by their myriad horrific experiences, the novel is not only a poignant and an enduring account of the tragedy that befell the Indian Subcontinent and its people in 1947, but also highlights its communal as well as its political aspects. It dwells upon the vivisection of the country from a common man's point of view, vividly describing pogrom and gory incidents that constituted the holocaust of the partition and expresses the adverse influences it has on human psyche. Apparently, Nahal does not only intend to communicate the catastrophic travails and tribulations that the people encountered during the painful process of dismembering the sub continent but also hopes to allude towards its psychological aftermath.

The all too pertinent issue of communal belligerence between the Hindus and the Muslims of the sub-continent occupies a major section of the novel as Nahal deftly delineates how the partition had been instrumental in radically changing perceptions and relationships; how friends suddenly became foes; and how the culture of acrimony between the Hindus and the Muslims gained ground. Before the partition both Chaudhari Barkat Ali and Abdul Ghani were bosom friends of Lala Kanshi Ram. While the relationship between Barkat Ali and Kanshi Ram was brotherly, the Ghani-Khanshi Ram relation is described by Nahal in the following terms:

...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. If they worshipped different gods, it was in the privacy of their homes, they were not Muslims or Hindus, they were Punjabis. (Nahal. p.54)¹

However, under the influence of leaders like Jinnah, simple people like Ghani became staunch Muslim leaguers obsessed with the idea of Pakistan and hatred for the Hindus. Ignoring his personal views he adhered to the dictates of his 'mentor' Jinnah Sahib who undoubtedly "... knew better. They [Muslim League] said view your Hindu neighbour with suspicion, and he did that. They said there should be a Pakistan, and he shouted for Pakistan." (p. 56) Ghani adopted an attitude of immense abhorrence towards Kanshi Ram and the rest of the Hindus simply because Jinnah asked him to do so. He not only led the procession celebrating Pakistan's creation but also derived a sadistic pleasure in heaping insults on Lala Kanshi Ram and Arun whom he had always addressed, "Ohai Arun de putter' till a few days ago. When the latter visited the railway station to look for his sister's dead body Ghani stated without any qualms "...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 forever!" (p. 185). Describing this transformation from humanism to barbarism during the days of the partition, K.K.Sharma in his article, "The 1947 Upheaval and the Indian English Novel" points out that "Men did not exercise their discretion during those fatal days and their thoughts, views and feelings were thoroughly coloured by their political leaders."² Thus while on one hand Nahal gives expression to the anguish and dismay of the people of India, when the country was divided, on the other he gives a graphic description of man's wolfish cruelty to man in the name of religion. The partition thus served the purpose of changing humans into beasts who perpetrated extremely barbaric cruelties against their fellow human beings. People transcended the borders of humanity, and the partition evolved into an unforgettable human catastrophe. However, not every Muslim detested his Hindu friends and neighbours after the announcement of the partition. Many of them like Chaudhri Barkat Ali felt embarrassed in front of their close friends like Kanshi Ram whom they were not able to help.

Nahal's description of the alienation between the school friends Arun, Kanshi Ram's son and Munir, Chaudhari Barkat Ali's son, who had always shared similar interests, further illustrates the vicious and dissipating consequences of the animosity that developed between the two communities. While before the partition during a discussion with Bill Davidson, a common friend, when the latter showed his surprise over the friendship of a Hindu and a Muslim, Arun had remarked, "do you find that so odd?" after the announcement of the partition the two friends unequivocally expressed their distrust in each other's community. Replying to one of Arun's query whether the Hindus could continue to live in Pakistan when Davidson replied "can't answer the question. It depends on how Pakistan treats the Hindus," Munir immediately retorted "And also how the new India treats the Muslims." Apparently this remark made by Munir is prompted, by a spontaneous desire to come out in defence of his religion (p.123)

Azadi further exemplifies that communalism did not only hamper friendly relations but also created distances between lovers and jeopardized their romantic lives. Arun was deeply attached to Nur, Munir's younger sister and intended to marry her, but the rift emerging between the Hindus and the Muslims overpowered their romantic life and their love was overshadowed by the issue debating who among the two would embrace the other's religion. "Why should I become a Muslim? ... Why shouldn't you? That is if you love me," Arun had asked Nur'...."Why shouldn't you become a Hindu?" (pp. 96-97). His sister's cold blooded murder by none other than his uncle Abdul Ghani made him a strong willed person, and without thinking about his paramour Nur, who expected him to embrace Islam for their love, he left Sialkot without hesitation in search of a secure life for his family in the newly formed India.

The author however does not hold any one community responsible for the riots that accompanied the partition in Azadi. While in West Punjab, Nahal blames the Muslims for inflicting miseries upon their Hindu friends, he acquaints his readers with the atrocities inflicted upon Muslims by Hindus and Sikhs as soon as his protagonist and his family cross the border. On the Indian side of the border, Kanshi Ram and his entourage did not witness sights very different from those they had witnessed in Pakistan. K.K.Sharma writes, "...the Hindus are shown suffering immeasurably at the hands of the Muslims in the newly created Pakistan but when they cross the border and reach India, they find the Muslims passing through the storm and fire of tortures."³ On reaching India, Lala Kanshi Ram states. "...whatever the Muslims did to us in Pakistan, we're doing it to them here!" (p.338), and confesses before his wife, "I have ceased to hate....I can't hate the Muslims any more" (p. 338). Kanshi Ram formed these views only after having witnessed a procession of Muslim girls who were paraded through the streets of Amritsar, as he realised that each of those girls was someone's Madhu.

Azadi therefore not only emerges as a juxtaposition of the perspectives of two generations victimised by the partition and compares their reactions, but also highlights the ironical reaction of the people of the Indian Subcontinent who had fought against the British together but suddenly turned against each other and thirsted for each other's blood. The novel further surfaces as an interrogation of the credibility of political stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru who had persistently promised the people of India to oust the British without the division of the subcontinent. Nahal successfully voices the disillusioned common man's resentments against his leaders in the person of Kanshi Ram who raises the question as to why the Mahatma had not used his weapon of fasting unto death to oppose the partition.

After all how could it happen? For the last thirty years, since that wizard Gandhi came on the scene, it [Congress] had taken the stand that India was a single nation not two. And Gandhi was not only a politician, he was a saint.... He wouldn't give in to such butchery. If nothing else worked, his fasts unto death always did.... that's what Gandhi would do. (pp.48-49)

At the same time he also blames the first Prime Minister of free India, Jawahar Lal Nehru, for conforming to Jinnah's demand for a separate Muslim state in the novel. To crown it all, he holds both Gandhi and C. Rajagopalachari responsible for giving Jinnah the very idea of a separate country for the Muslims. In fact Nahal raises the question whether leaders like Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah were worth all the respect and following they received from the masses? Did Jinnah and Nehru not agree to the partition in order to satisfy their own desiderata and played havoc with the lives of millions? Why did Gandhi not resort to his weapon of fast unto death in opposition to the partition? Thus the mischief and manipulations of the Hindu and Muslim politicians leading to the catastrophic political and social tragedies that were consequent to the dismemberment of the sub continent have been unequivocally voiced by the author in Azadi. The partition seems to emerge as a decision taken by a select few affecting the lives of millions of people adversely in the novel. K.K. Sharma, avers "the novelist shows the masses as mere puppets in the hands of clever, selfish and power-hungry politicians."⁴

Nahal does not simply blame the Hindus and the Muslims, and their leaders for the partition of the country, but also holds the English equally responsible for it. Lala Kanshi Ram, who had always held the British government in high esteem, remarked, "Then the English have let us down. It was their job, their obligation, to see that freedom came smoothly..." (pp.140-41). He also expressed his disgust and his despair before Bill Davidson, Arun's friend who had come to help all the Hindu families living

in the neighbourhood to escape to camp before the Muslim mob attacked their houses. He asks him: "While striking a deal with these 'leaders' did you ever think of us? Did you for one moment consider what might befall it? Freedom for sure, we welcome it. But why the violence? It is a denial of what the English stood for during the two hundred years in this country! And it is the English who have the biggest hands in this butchery (p. 47-48).

Nahal through Lala Kanshi Ram explicated a positive and optimistic view that emphasized forgiveness. Since the Hindus and Sikhs were as much responsible as the Muslims, in committing nefarious and heinous crimes against those trying to cross the border, therefore Kanshi Ram believed that his fellow Hindus should seek the pardon of the Muslims, and said, 'we have sinned as much. We need their forgiveness!' (P 340)

Besides describing various dimensions and perspectives of the partition and its influences on the life of the common man in vivid detail, Nahal has taken special care to elucidate its psychological influences on his protagonist who is a representative of the millions. According to Sharma, "Nahal is the only writer who has been able to evince the tremendous psychological impact of the event on the people—viz. the complete loss of contact and communication with one another throwing them into a state of complete isolation and alienation and making each a prisoner of his 'single self'."⁵ Despite the incessant sufferings and traumas that came with the partition, Kanshi Ram surfaced as a mature person in the end. Although excessive bereavement and deprivation were thrust upon him and his family in the wake of the partition he seemed to have no complaints against anyone. On the contrary, he adopted a philosophical attitude towards life, and his earlier stance for materialistic gains in life was transformed into an ambition for the peace of the soul. The murders and loot that he had witnessed did not agitate him anymore, but enabled him to evolve into a pensive and reflective individual who could distinguish between right and wrong. In fact there comes a point in life when torture doesn't agonise man and may lose its enervating attributes for it is accepted as a part of life, and this is exactly what transpired with Kanshi Ram. Commenting on the evolution of Kanshi Ram's consciousness Saros Cowasjee writes, "The loss of his daughter, his home, his property adds dignity to him..."⁶ Instead of passing a rash judgement against those who perpetrated numerous miseries on him and his companions and family, he told his wife: "Forgive, that way alone you can make peace with yourself" (p. 339).

The fact that Nahal ends the novel with an elucidation of Sunanda's sewing machine running at great speed carries a lot of significance. Here the author endeavours to emphasize the mechanical aspect of human life, deprived of emotions and feelings. By portraying Sunanda working on the sewing machine Nahal also seems to suggest the continuity of life despite all its adversities. Towards the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Nahal takes the partition as a fact of life, which he suggests that everybody should accept and start life afresh. Further this philosophical optimism displayed by Kanshi Ram is reinforced by the thinking of his son Arun, who on account of his traumatic experiences during the course of his journey across the border adopted a more flexible attitude towards humanity. His views about the society and its norms underwent a transformation as is observed by KK Sharma:

After all the shocks, frustration, despair and nihilism, he at last finds himself reborn and a great realization dawns upon him. He feels that the tragedy of partition with all its holocaust will eliminate all the barriers of caste and class that alienate man from man and turn them enemies of one another.⁷

While a cursory reading of the novel reveals that the partition caused bereavement and pain to Kanshi Ram and his family, a profound analysis underlines that partition and its consequences had a cathartic effect on people like Kanshi Ram and his son Arun. They revived from the traumas of the partition with newly formed personalities.

Dramatizing and exhibiting the communal and violent aspects of the partition, along with their debilitating effect on individual lives Nahal suggests that the partition has had certain positive humanistic implications as people who have experienced it emerge wiser after their horrifying experiences. No doubt they are psychologically alienated from each other, but their shallow understanding of life is replaced by a profound and a clear comprehension of its mysteries. According to Dr. V.P. Sharma,

Azadi...is a plea for the restoration of humanistic values in the world. Both Lala Kanshi Ram's and Arun's lack of bitterness, in spite of all that they have undergone is a testimony to Nahal's abiding faith in humanism. If an epigraph were to be added to the novel, the following lines from Blake's "Gates of Paradise" would be most apt;

Mutual forgiveness of each vice;
Such are the gates of paradise.⁸

Rightly described by Mulk Raj as "a sweeping, shattering saga of the colossal tragedy and disruption that accompanied the partition and independence in the Indian sub-continent,"⁹ and covering a short yet significant period in Indian history (from June 3 1947 to Jan 30 1948), *Azadi* deliberates upon the social conditions of the subcontinent before the announcement of the partition; the diverse reactions of the different communities to the announcement; and the onslaught of the partition over the material and the psychological lives of the people. In a careful and unbiased manner it dwells upon the celebrations, the disillusionment and miseries of the common man consequent to the partition, thus emphasizing its humanitarian aspects.

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