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## Depiction of Indian Freedom Movement in Chaman Nahal's Historical Novels

**Shobha Bajirao Patil**

Associate Professor,

Dept. of English,

BhogawatiMahavidyalaya, Kurukali,

Dist. Kolhapur.

Maharashtra, India.

&

**Dr. P. R. Shewale**

Principal,

D. D. ShindeSarkar College, Kolhapur,

Maharashtra, India.

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### Abstract:

The Freedom Movement of India occupies a prominent place in the history of India. It has historical, political and social significance as it culminated into the attainment of freedom on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947. It was a great awakening of the Indians against British imperialism. Before the great mutiny of 1857, many revolts, rebellions, riots and disturbances occurred throughout India against their imperialism, but they were ruthlessly suppressed by the British government. As a result, the nationalism arose to meet the challenge of foreign domination. Indian English literature also aroused National consciousness and created a sense of Patriotism. Indian English novel of the period and after was deeply influenced by the great National Movement.(1915-1947)

The depiction of the Indian freedom movement and Gandhiji's role in it is the primary concern of Chaman Nahal, the modern Indian English novelist in his *The Gandhi Quartet*. He depicts the conflicts between the British Empire and the Indian people with great fidelity.

**Keywords:** Depiction, Indian, Freedom Movement, Historical Novels, British Imperialism, Nationalism.

## **Introduction:**

The Freedom Movement of India occupies a prominent place in the history of India. It has historical, political and social significance as it culminated into the attainment of freedom on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, after many trials and tribulations. It was a great awakening of the Indians against British imperialism. Before the great mutiny of 1857, many revolts, rebellions, riots and disturbances occurred throughout India against their imperialism. However, all these rebellions and riots were ruthlessly suppressed by the British government. As a result, the nationalism arose to meet the challenge of foreign domination. The very existence of British rule helped the growth of national sentiment and the process of the unification of the country. The foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 marked on a new beginning in the history of Indian nationalism. Scholars and leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Dayanand Saraswati, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhans and his illustrious disciple Swami Vivekananda and persons like Rabindranath Tagore, Bipin Chandra Pal, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar paved the way for the freedom struggle in one way or other.

Moreover, Indian English literature also aroused National consciousness and created a sense of Patriotism. Indian English literature in general and Indian English novel of the period and after in particular was deeply influenced by the great National Movement.(1915-1947) Mahatma Gandhi's call for struggle, various movements like non-cooperation movement, the civil disobedience, Salt Satyagraha, Quit India Movement, India's Independence and Partition were significantly reflected in these novels. The novelists discovered some of the most compelling themes like the ordeal of the freedom struggle, the east-west relationship, the community problems and the plight of untouchables, the landless poor and the downtrodden, the economically exploited and the oppressed. The present paper explores the depiction of these various aspects of the Indian freedom movement in Chaman Nahal's four historical novels – *The Gandhi Quartet*.

Chaman Nahal, a modern Indian English novelist has fictionalized history of the Indian freedom movement in his series of historical novels. *The Gandhi Quartet* deals with four novels; all of them concentrate on a depiction of Indian Freedom Movement and the problems of the partition. About his literary inspiration in writing *The Gandhi Quartet*, Chaman Nahal writes,

The idea of a more significant novel dealing with our entire freedom movement had been growing with me for some time. If I was after dignity, what greater symbol of human dignity in contemporary India could one find other than Gandhi? He had carried a vanquished and crushed nation to newer heights, where the average Indian could stand on his feet and face any adversary. He had devised metaphors which touched the hearts of millions all over the country: the spinning wheel, the salt march, the Quit India slogan – what were they if not means of communication; he had devised a new language. Partition was a disaster, his own heart must be bleeding at that denouement, but the freedom movement was a singular success. And not for India alone but the oppressed nations of the entire world. Why wouldn't I plan a long novel, or series of them, around that glorious struggle of ours? During those few days in London, and the discussion, I had with Mulk Raj Anand, the seed took firmer root in my consciousness. (*Silent Life* 111)

The series of novels depicts the arrival of Gandhiji in India in 1915 from Africa and ends with four years after his death. The writer attempted to explore every minute issue regarding the struggle of freedom. Every novel in the quartet is complete in itself, and yet the writer succeeded to introduce each one as one of the flowers in the garland. Let us discuss and analyse these novels.

### **1. The Crown and the Loincloth:**

In this first-ever fictional presentation of India's freedom movement, Nahal concentrates on the years 1915-1922, and on the towering figure of Gandhi, whose burning idealism fired an entire nation's patriotism, and whom the author sees as a symbol of moral and spiritual strength triumphing over physical odds.

Through him, the novel follows the fortunes of Thakur Shanti Nath, a landowner of Amritsar in Punjab, and his joint family. All of them are inexorably drawn into the hub of political activity, as Gandhi's ideology crystallises into a policy of non-violent resistance against the British. Their private lives are woven with historical characters and events during the Indian freedom movement. Nahal has created the character of Sunil, the protagonist of the novel very successfully. He can be compared to Raja Rao's protagonist Murti from the novel, Kanthapura.

Sunil is a self-independent person who loves the philosophy of Gandhiji. He believes that only the ideology of Gandhiji can make India free and survive the ordinary people and their rights. In his attempt to save the Prince of Wales, he gets killed. His martyr-like death drawn appreciation from all, including Gandhiji. Gandhiji himself wishes such type of death for himself. After Sunil's death, his wife Kusum with her little son Vikram joins Gandhiji Ashram Sabarmati. Their involvement in the Indian freedom movement is continued till the last novel.

The novel touches to the different issues concerned with the life of Gandhiji; notably his arrival to India in 1915, his journey all over India to know or understand the Indian society and its mentality, the impact he made on the ordinary human beings, his writing to encourage the people to participate in the battle of the freedom and at last how he got a success to turn the mind of people against the Rowlett bills which were opposed by Gandhiji and his followers. One more critical issue exposed in the novel through Gandhiji was concerned to the women and how Gandhiji brought them in the mainstream against the British Raj. Gandhiji was at one hand trying to transform the mind of the people through his speeches, journey and writings; on the other hand, he was making the minds of Indian people to explain the importance of spinning and weaving in achieving self-sufficiency in women at least in clothing. His role is so significant in Indian freedom movement, As Natwar Singh says,

No Gandhi, no freedom movement. It is as stark as that. No Gandhi, no miraculous generation of leaders like Motilal Nehru, C. R. Das, Vallabhbhai Patel, C. Rajgopalachari, Sarojini Naidu, Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Jawaharlal Nehru. One who could draw such men to him was no mortal. He was a repository of spiritual values. He civilised our political manners and humanised our conduct. (*Singh 81*)

The endearing portrait of Kenneth Ashby, a British ICS officer, highlights the love for India. Many of the British displayed the close bond that existed between them and the Indians.

The novel *The Crown and the Loincloth* ends with Gandhiji's arrest on charges of sedition and his being sentenced for six years imprisonment. Nahal describes it as, "For the time being, the lion in the loincloth was caged".

## 2. The Salt of Life:

The canvas of *The Salt of Life*, another of Nahal's novels about India's freedom movement, runs from 1930-1941. While Gandhi is getting ready to set out for Dandi, Kusum informs him that she is marrying Raja Vishal Chand, the ruler of a small princely state. She had come to the Gandhi Ashram in Sabarmati in 1922 along with her son Vikram soon after her first husband, Sunil Kumar, was killed while saving the Prince of Wales during an attempt on his life in Lahore. Vikram, now thirteen, elects to stay on in the ashram and joins Gandhi in his famous salt march.

In 1941, Kusum was struck by tragedy a second time. Raja Vishal Chand dies in a mountain accident, and she decides to return to Gandhi, who has since moved his ashram to Sevagram. In the political scenario, a dramatic alternative to Gandhi is established through the introduction of Bhagat Singh and Subhash Chandra Bose, but Gandhi remains the master of the situation.

Since the novel is about the freedom of the motherland, Kusum slowly takes on the role of a symbolic mother, a role which grows on her and the reader.

The novel again displays Nahal's inimitable hold of character and situation and his immense faith in the cultural synthesis and unity of India.

The novel opens with the news of Gandhi's arrest in 1922. Fortunately, he was quickly released on the health ground as he had been suffering from appendices and the operation was essential, which took place in January 1924. However, it was six-year imprisonment, and during this period, Gandhiji deliberately preserved himself from indulging in political activities on the moral grounds as his real imprisonment was for six years. When he relieved from jail in 1928, he again became the active fighter against the government. Gandhiji's previous movements also got a new life, and with the new and fresh aspect, he began to fight against the British government. He contemplated every movement and thought that every principle of life could lead the people to support him and get the freedom to India. About the agitation against liquor shops, he wrote to the government as;

Look, Viceroy, I'm about to hold picketing against the liquor shops all over the country. I believe drinking is morally wrong, and in a poor country like ours, it also imposes economic hardships; the much-needed money is wasted away on alcohol. Men as well women will take part in the picketing. They will see the liquor stores do not open; or that no one can buy anything if they do manage to

raise their shutters. These men and women will be willing to court arrest, if necessary, in the pursuit of their aim. There might be lathi charges which the police would be forced to resort to, to maintain peace. My men and women won't break law and order,' but the situation might so develop because of the miscreants who are at each place to add fuel to the fire. There might be thus much suffering, which my followers will willingly go through. But if you can write to me and convince me that it is a wrong step to take, this picketing of liquor stores and that drinking is a morally defensible habit, then I will call off the agitation. (SL 19)

At this juncture, the idea of the Salt Satyagraha came in his mind and in 1930 he started the Dandi March to break the salt laws of the British government. The salt is an essential element in the food, but the government had loaded taxes on the salt, so Gandhiji decided to break the law of the salt. So he began his Dandi March from Sabarmati, he walked seven hundred miles along with thousands of the people and broke down the critical law of the salt.

### **3. The Triumph of the Tricolour:**

In *The Triumph of the Tricolour*, Chaman Nahal returns to India's freedom movement and this novel deals with the 1942 Quit India period. Gandhi is the central figure even here. The violent revolutionaries play a significant role as a challenge to British rule.

Kusum's two sons, Vikram and Amit, adopt different postures. Vikram, being the product of the Gandhi Ashram, where he has lived from the age of five, follows the Gandhian path. Amit, Kusum's son by Raja Vishal Chand, is more inclined towards the violent revolutionaries. Historical circumstances force the British to announce an interim Indian government in 1946 before India's full freedom. While most of the Congress leaders accept office in that government, Vikram declines the honour. He, instead, opts to accompany Gandhi on his village-to-village walk to calm the communal frenzy.

Kusum's family allies with Lala Kanshi Ram of Sialkot. His family will be placed in Pakistan if the partition of India is accepted by the British. It gives tremendous momentum to the story and anticipation, which is all too clearly established in the novel.

The present novel is the most astonishing piece of literature which focuses on different issues like- Quit India Movement started in 1942, the role of Vikram and Kusum; the imaginative characters, the magic Gandhiji made on all people of India, Vikram's attempt to

release the Prisoners of Japan, impact of second world war on the daily life of the people in India, the significant and central character of fourth novel Lala Kanshi Ram and his primary role, Bengal's great famine of 1943, the actions of Subhash Chandra Bose, activities of Amit, Kusum's son the cabinet mission sent in 1946 by the British government to India and the horrible picture of the communal riots. The concept of complete freedom is prominent in the novel:

It didn't take long to decide that yet another mass movement by the Congress had to be launched and on an "unprecedented scale", a fight to the finish. It comes to him in a flash that no more should the Congress ask for farmers from the British. Hitherto, it had dominion status for India. Hitherto it had requested complete freedom, PurnaSwaraj at the term acceptable to British no more (*TT 14*).

#### **4. Azadi:**

*Azadi*, the last of Chaman Nahal's novels about India's freedom movement. It is based on the partition of India in 1947, when ten million people on both sides of the border were involved in this holocaust, Around the central figure of Lala Kanshi Ram, secure in his position as a grain merchant in the city of Sialkot, are gathered the family and friends of a lifetime-a world that is altogether shattered by what comes to pass. Murder, looting and arson become daily events when Lala Kanshi Ram is forced to flee out of the newly created Pakistan into India. Similar types of horrors were faced by the Muslims living in India is abundantly conveyed in the novel.

In a masterly way, Nahal evokes the life just around the end of the British rule, the happy growing up of Lala Kanshi Ram's two children, and the neighbourhood bonds of friendship irrespective of religion, caste or creed. He also poses disturbing questions about the nature of cultural identities and yet asserts his faith in an India free of religious fanaticism.

Nahal writes about his urge behind writing the novel *Azadi* in the following words,

I ... began work on what I knew was to be the truly major work of my life: a novel on the Partition of India. I had lived with this for the last twenty-two years, every single day of the long period reminding me of the moral wrong of that hasty decision- a needle that had never ceased pricking me. My father had lost everything he had at Sialkot. My sister Kartar Devi and her husband had been brutally murdered. My mother had been pushed into a coma from which she never fully emerged. I had lost friends whom I was unlikely to see again. While the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan and East Bengal were stewed, similar misfortunes

had befallen the Muslims in India. Thus began *Azadi*, projecting that enormous emotional and social trauma of our lives. I kept the Indian word as its title, since its translation, ‘Freedom,’ did not quite convey the correct nuances of our struggle. True freedom had eluded us in 1947, though, I maintained. (*Silent Life* 69)

The Epilogue links together Nahal’s four novels of *The Gandhi Quartet*. In the Epilogue, the two main families of the Quartet, Kusum’s and Lata Kanshi Ram’s are shown adjusting to the harsh realities of a new India where true freedom has still not come.

*Azadi* is so realistic in its description that Nahal seems to wrote down this novel with his blood and tears of his eyes. The depiction of the novel testifies to Nahal’s firsthand knowledge of the partition. It is also evident that Nahal is himself a victim of this sordid partition. Pakistan was created by religion. The autobiographical element is apparent in the pages of the novel. Nahal was nineteen years old at the time of division, and so was Arun. Nahal opted for English and Arun was also the student of English Honours in Murray College, Sialkot. Nahal’s love for the city of Sialkot is echoed through the character of Lala Kanshi Ram. Nahal mentions this fact explicitly in his essay “Writing a Historical Novel”.

One of the theme that I came to be occupied with after the partition of India was that of forced exile. I was born in Sialkot, and after 1947 we were driven away to India.....I have away rejected the two nation theory; the creation of Pakistan in no way solved the problem of minorities. And till this day, I pined for the city in which I was born and raised. I see this as a typical yearning of all in voluntary exiles. Hence I wrote *Azadi* as a hymn to one’s land of birth, rather than a realistic novel of partition. (*Dhawan* 43-44)

The concluding part of the novel, describing Sunanda’s sewing machine running at the top speed is highly suggestive. The sewing machine, with all its continuous rhythmic movements, sounds and vibrations, suggests the continuous rhythmic flow of life. The life goes on, with all its joys and sorrows.

Thus, *Azadi*, like other novels dealing with the holocaust of India’s partition, occupies a special place in Indian English fiction.

The depiction of the Indian freedom movement and Gandhiji's role in it is the primary concern of Chaman Nahal in writing historical novels. There are various conflicts which are handled on different levels. The main focus is on conflicts between the British Empire and the Indian people. It is a conflict between coloniser and colonised, the white and the black. There is also conflict between the Non-violent way of Gandhiji and forceful and violent ways of revolutionaries to fight against the British Empire. Nahal has depicted Indian freedom movement in Gandhian age with its entire political, social and cultural scenario very faithfully.

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