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***Azadi* by Chaman Nahal from a Postcolonial Perspective***Priya Charan*

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**Abstract**

“In the blink of an eye, our lives were torn asunder, our homes shattered, and our loved ones lost to the madness of partition. The scars of that fateful day run deep, etched into the fabric of our souls”. These lines reflect the profound personal losses endured by individuals and families as a result of partition, capturing the grief, displacement, and sense of dislocation experienced by those caught up in one of the darkest chapters of modern history of India. *Azadi* explores the struggles and aspirations of individuals grappling with the legacy of colonialism and the quest for freedom and identity. The novel takes the backdrop of a normal middle class family of Lala Kanshi Ram in Sialkot (present day Pakistan), having no political connections yet were the victims of a havoc created by the political class of India and British Raj then. In *Azadi*, Chaman Nahal outlines the dawn of freedom, the partition and its aftermath. While reading about the brutal murders, merciless massacres, cruel rapes, burning and looting of properties, one could feel horrified. It depicts the unprecedented and ugly event which left lives millions of people asunder. After the partition, there is a large scale migration of people from both the sides of the border between India and Pakistan. The novel is divided into three parts such as ‘Lull’, ‘Storm’ and ‘Aftermath’. In ‘Lull’, the author portrays the silent atmosphere before the announcement of the partition. In the second part ‘Storm’, he presents the horrifying story of the merciless killing of the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs after the partition. The third part ‘Aftermath’, he portrays the assassination of Gandhi and how people have suffered due to it. Characters in the novel grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and the preservation of cultural heritage in the face of colonial assimilation. The author examines the lingering effects of colonialism on Indian society and politics, as well as the disillusionment and unfulfilled promises of independence. The novel raises important questions about the meaning of freedom and the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality in postcolonial India. Although *Azadi* is mostly examined through the lens of partition and rightly so. But a wholesome picture can only be depicted when one delves into the aspect colonialism and its impact on India and how

partition of the Indian Subcontinent was one of the results of brutality of British Raj on India. My paper would, therefore study the aspects of postcolonialism, that is, language, role of women, partition, politics, colonial institutions, belonging, displacement, memories, emotions and identity in the novel *Azadi*.

Few individuals, including the family of Lala Kanshi Ram, a grain dealer, are most affected by this major historical event. Young lovers, such as Arun and Nur, and subsequently, Arun's relationship with Chandni are thwarted by the country's division. The novel "Azadi" describes the sorrow and crimes that occurred during the Partition of India, the darkest event in India's history. India was mercilessly separated into two pieces, India and Pakistan, leaving a severe wound on the minds of countless millions of individuals. According to critic Sisir Kumar Das: "the people were tormented by recollections of terror, looting, fire, murder, and rape, which heightened their sense of terror and instability. Millions of people were uprooted and relocated to the new frontiers to endure difficult lives. Before the people could comprehend the political ramifications of the split, they were blinded by extraordinary horrors and cruelty."

As India acquired independence from the British Empire in 1947, the Partition of India was the means of dividing the subcontinent along ethnic lines. It resulted in the formation of the Muslim-dominated northern state of Pakistan and the Hindu-dominated southern portion of the Republic of India. However, Partition destroyed both India and Pakistan. It displaced around 15 million individuals from their homes. The two nations began their independence with bankrupt economies and areas lacking an established, effective administration. *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal is a modern masterpiece that conceals an all-encompassing revelation of life, symbolizing the societal and individual havoc partition wreaked on the people of the country. From a literary standpoint, it depicts the realistic historical documentation of the horrific clashes precipitated by the split. As a former refugee, Chaman Nahal writes with remarkable insight and reality. Therefore, he has portrayed his personal experiences through the characters of Lala Kashiram and his son Arun. The narrative focuses on the tranquillity setting preceding the proclamation of division, the terrible episodes that resulted from Partition, and the dreadful conditions of the desensitized refugees following Partition.

*Azadi*, one of Gandhi's Chorus's novels, is considered Chaman Nahal's finest work. This tale was inspired by Nahal's experience of living in Sialkot during the Partition of India. Nahal himself observes: "I wrote *Azadi* as a hymn to one's land of birth rather than a realistic novel

of the Partition. (Nahal, 10) The novel is historical, political, and a superb piece of art above all else. Nahal has offered a realistic depiction of the Partition's interim as well as a humanitarian approach. When we learn of the killings, massacres, rapes, arson, looting, and the plight of uprooted refugees caused by the division, we are appalled. According to K R. Srinivasa Iyengar: "Azadi is a film about India's Partition, which engulfed the subcontinent in a nightmare of terror for months and left a trail of incredible bitterness and agony in its wake. Even after all these years, the scars bleed again as recollection prods them".<sup>1</sup> Chaman Nahal was himself a victim of the Partition, a refugee who endured painful hardships on his trek over the border. Therefore, he has portrayed his personal experiences through Lala Kashi Ram and his son Arun.

The novel Azadi begins in the Pakistani city of Sialkot. According to the author, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs coexisted amicably in majority-Muslim Sialkot before the Partition. Fear, animosity, and hostility developed among the inhabitants of Sialkot, and a riot broke out there for the first time. The protagonist of Azadi expresses his perspective on Partition and British control. Lala Kanshi Ram feels conflicted about the British. They are admired for their merits yet criticized for their flaws. He appreciated the security of the British Raj and affectionately embraced it. His nation, which had been torn apart, had found peace thanks to the rulers. As per the protagonist of the novel, "They are a nation which cannot be easily beaten, he thought. A handful of them has kept us under their feet for over two hundred years."<sup>2</sup> Lala Kanshi Ram also lauded the authority of British rule and the police officials. For instance, he had considerable confidence in General Ress. Before leaving his home, however, Lala Kanshi Ram accuses the British of failing to safeguard the refugee. Additionally, he attributes problems to the British. If the British were to

lose India, it was not because of Gandhi or the awakening of the masses but rather because of the tactical blunder they committed by sending out an unattractive Viceroy during the key days of their Raj. Brutality and atrocities The novel Azadi powerfully illustrates Nahal's dissatisfaction with the Partition of India and the intensity of his pain and rage. In this work, he intends to provide the most exhaustive description of the Partition. Lala Kanshi Ram is aware that the Viceroy would make an important radio statement on the evening of the third of June, 1947, putting an end to all speculation. He appears uncomfortable and dreads the terrible repercussions "if the English agree to give Pakistan to Jinnah." (Nahal, 27) Lala Kanshi Ram is concerned about the division of the nation. He recognizes in it the cunning British scheme. He is familiar with the British policy of promoting the Partition. His conviction in Gandhi's commitment not to accept the Partition appears to be waning. The book analyses this disruption

with tremendous sympathy and criticizes the horrific atrocities committed against innocent people as a result of Partition. Kanshi Ram's world is broken by the birth of Pakistan, and he stands as a shattered man, unsupported by his most valued ideas and morals. This demonstrates that the author was not pleased with the Partition of India, and he vividly articulated his grief and indignation over it in *Azadi*, which is primarily a political book whose protagonist, Lala Kanshi Ram, opposes the split. He blames the English, stating, "Yes, they were the real villains; they had let the country down- they had let him down, he who put such faith in them" Different communities react differently to the news of the Partition. Muslims are enthralled by the news. They mark the occasion by blowing firecrackers. The loudness and glare of these fireworks afflict Hindus and Sikhs, causing them to lose their appetite. The Muslim dwellings and rooftops are illuminated with clay lamps, and as more and more lights come on, it appears as though the ground exploded in a volcanic eruption. They express their excitement with dancing, fake combat, and singing, as well as by forcibly leading the parade past the Hindu Mohalla, where Lala Kanshi Ram and his companions reside. The Police Superintendent and Deputy Commissioner make every effort to maintain order. Hindus and Muslims began to despise and tear one other apart.

Even though "Azadi" focuses on the political upheaval at the time of India's Partition into India and Pakistan, it focuses on the aftermath of the greatest catastrophe in the history of contemporary India. "Azadi" highlights the influence of Indian politics in the lives of Hindus and Muslims in general, as well as its impact on the lives of lovers such as Arun and Nur, and subsequently Arun and Chandni. The love between Arun and Nur is ephemeral and fleeting. The Partition of India serves as a backdrop to both Arun and Nur's life, causing their love to be ripped apart. Similar to the divide of the country into two halves, there is a division in their lives, namely the separation of their hearts. Their love has been entirely shattered and destroyed. As a result of the prevailing political unrest, the lovers are compelled to part ways, as their future looks too grim to them. Arun, who resides in Sialkot with his parents, must leave the area since it was incorporated into Pakistan. Arun falls in love with the daughter of Chaudhari Barkat Ali, Nurul Nisar. It has just been two years since Arun and Nurul Nisar, also known as Nur, expressed their love for one another. Yet, each time he approached her, regardless of where he approached her, he yearned for her as if it were their first meeting. There was always a slight flutter in his heart. Will she arrive or not? Will a foe be hiding someplace to inform of their whereabouts? Will she or will she not be able to make it? 8 After the declaration of India's division, Arun, a Hindu teenager having a romance with a Muslim girl,

comes under the ominous surveillance of other Muslim lads. The political crisis founded on religious boundaries acts as an impediment between these two young lovers of different religions, and they both become extremely powerless. Arun previously pledges Nur that he would convert to Islam for her sake, but the entire situation gradually changes as division occurs. He inquires as to why Nur cannot adopt Hinduism. Nur is astonished to hear the news, which exceeds her anticipation, expectations, and greatest dreams. She tells Arun, through sobs, that she is defenceless and cannot impose her will on her family. She expects Arun to make sacrifices for her since he is a male and so more self-reliant. Arun loves her passionately. As reported by Mohan Jha, “Arun and Nur may have been married despite their different religions in the normal order of events, but the eruption of communal violence turns everything upside down. Arun might have chosen Nur over his parents when he was young, but the community holocaust transforms him into a man, and he opts to share life’s pleasures and tragedies with them.” The Arun family chooses to leave the refugee camp and travel to Delhi. Munir, the brother of Nur, gives Arun a letter written by Nur. The letter is smeared with tears, which demonstrates Nur’s despondency.

In the third part ‘Aftermath’ depicts the events after the partition and independence like Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination and the contrasting reactions of the people on it. The priest of non –violence is killed by violence. Except a few refugees like Kanshi Ram and Sunanda all blame Mahatma for the partition tragedy. The mood of frustration and anger with reference to Gandhi was a common experience in those days. The discussion among Arun, Sunanda and Bibi Amar Vati after Gandhi’s assassination is worth studying,

Well, it is a good thing he is gone. He brought nothing but misery to us...It all happened because of the partition. And it was Gandhi who sanctioned the partition. ‘That’s not true’. Arun felt he had to put the record straight. ‘It was the Congress leaders, like Nehru and Patel’. ‘They were his stooges’. ‘No, auntie. You are wrong there. In the final days they didn’t listen to him. (PP. 366-367)

Thus, there is a controlled tension in Nahal’s narratives and his envenomed memories as a victim of partition have not, however, warped his sensibilities. Azadi (Independence) indeed lives in many levels – political, religious, social, cultural, and historical – and certain images haunts the reader. Niranjana Singh, straight as a sword, committing self- immolation, Sunanda’s fierce gesture of defiance confronting Rahmat Ullah, threatening to kill him if he touch her; Isher Kaur’s giving birth to a daughter in the refugee train just as another refugee train passes it by creeping towards Pakistan full of dead and dying. It is hardly possible to exorcise these

very realistic images. The plot of the novel through these images refers to the time just before the partition and depicts the ill-effects of the partition and ends with what happens to the refugees just after the partition and the independence. It also shows the contrasting characters like Barkat Ali who tries his best to give company to his friend Lala Kashi Ram and his family in their nightmarish moments and Rahmat Ullah Khan who as an officer instead of giving shelter and protection tried to rape Sunanda Bala. A nightmare with an exciting finish, one closes the novel with a sense of relief; the lie has become the truth, the unbelievable has happened. In *Azadi* (Independence) two episodes the procession of jubilant Muslims in Sialkot when the partition is announced, the queer parade of naked Hindu women in Narowal, and the immolation of Niranjana Singh stand out by their realism. And there is enough evidence to convict both the British administrators who, after two hundred years of trusteeship, could only prepare for the holocaust and the national movement led by barristers, thinkers, Mahatmas (an illustrious or eminent man), and Moulanas (a title of a Mahomedan scholar) that could celebrate the baptism of freedom only with mass murder and revolting bestiality.

Chaman Nahal has successfully communicated to his readers a hint of grossness, ghastliness, and total insanity of the two-nation theory and the partition tragedy. The whole horror is there but humanity and compassion are there too and the novel adequately conveys them both. Thus, though the novel's events seem to us like a nightmare, it is the reality that every Indian of that time had to face and till now in the 21st century, it is a living wound. However, the novelist here tries to show a note of hope in the end of the novel after the nightmare i.e. the re-settlement of the families of Lala Kashi Ram and other tenants

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