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Political Thinking in Chaman Nahal's Novels: A Select Study

Abstract

Indian English literature came into prominence during the later stage of colonization. It took its inception in the hands of R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao who contributed to the Indian fiction in the 1930s. Chaman Nahal, a Sahitya Academy winner for his notable novel *Azadi* in 1977, has taken up the history of Indian struggle for Independence which covers Mahatma Gandhi's lead in political arena. His *The Gandhi Quartet* consists of four novels which deal with the four phases: 1915–1922, 1930-1941, 1942 of Quit India Movement and aftermath, Partition till Gandhi's assassination in 1948. His novels *The Crown and the Loincloth* (1981), *The Salt of the Life* (1993), *The Triumph of the Tricolour* (1993) and *Azadi* (1975) mainly deal with the political philosophy of Gandhi and his achievements. *Azadi* which was written first should be treated separately from the other three novels forming one single unit. After an interval of seven years, *The Crown and The Loincloth* was published and after a gap of nearly eighteen years came to light *The Salt of Life* and *The Triumph of the Tricolour*.

This article attempts to study the political consciousness of the time in the above given novels which leads the country to the threshold of freedom and ultimately possess it.

Keywords: India, Gandhi, Satyagraha, Political, Non-violence, Freedom struggle, British.

Introduction

"A Political novel is...a book which directly describes, interprets or analyses political phenomenon."

Joseph L. Boltner

The above given definition by Joseph L. Boltner aptly suits the theme of Chaman Nahal's novels. His novels mainly deal with the political actions of the time concerning which the characters of novels are related. Of *The Gandhi Quartet*, the first three novels, *The Crown and the Loincloth* (1981), *The Salt of the Life* (1993) and *The Triumph of the Tricolour* (1993), can be termed as 'Pure Gandhian' novels as they by and large deal with the political philosophy of Gandhi and his achievements. *Azadi* (1975) is a Partition novel. It deals with the theme of 'forced exile'. On writing up the novels on the freedom struggle of India, with Gandhi as a leading character, Nahal States:

"The question with me was, what period of Gandhi's career to select and play up? In this Gandhi helped. His political life in India falls in three neat phases: (1) The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-22, (2) The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-31, and the Quit India Movement of 1942. The *Crown and the Loincloth* deals with the first phase, and I will have to write two more novels to project fully the Gandhian experiment if at all those novels are ever written!" (Nahal, 43)

The premise of Gandhian life in Indian English novels may have three facets: In some Gandhi's influence rather than his presence shapes the development of the novel, in some others Gandhi's presence as a character is of importance and yet in some others Gandhi's life itself is the dominating theme of the novel. In this last category falls the

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novels of Nahal in which characters, situations and names of places are directly related to the life of one person. *The Crown and the Loincloth* (1981), also translated into Russian language, deals with the Indian political movement from the period 1915 to 1922. It is divided into three parts: Love, Perspectives and Affirmation. It is the first phase of the Gandhian era with historical accuracy and woven beautifully these elements in the life of fictitious characters of Sunil, Rakesh, Rehana, Kusum, Muzzafar, Thakur Shanti Nath, Hemant Kumar, Shyama and others. Their fate blossomed and withered with the political climate of the country during that period. This was the time when members of joint families, where the house owner had all the say in any decisions, started having difference of opinions and subsequently a split took place. One of the families in the novel is of Thakur Shanti Nath whose son Sunil left his father's home and on the advice of Gandhi he opened a khadi store in Ajitha. In the Gandhian philosophy and strategy khadi was not simply a hand woven cloth but a weapon in India's hand to destroy the British colonial economy and an important part of the Swadeshi movement. The people observed hartal in a non-violent manner. There was hartal in Amritsar as well as in the whole country against a new law called Rowlatt Bill, which sought to crush and challenge the people's rights. People from every religion took bath in the Golden Temple at Amritsar and observed fast. The Muslims, the Hindus and the Sikhs showed the strength of their solidarity in unity as they partook their bread together, "drank water of the same container and embraced each other in the streets".(52) The British were known for their policy of 'divide and rule' among different religious groups, but for the first time they were stunned and felt defeated by the influence of this leader, a priest of non-violence, Gandhi. There was no attack on the Britishers. It was the birth of a novel technique to strive for independence under the stewardship of Gandhi ji.

Gandhi was not a politician in the Machiavellian sense, but he did what ancient astuteness taught him. He never lost touch with his spirituality during the moments of his great political engagements. He unlike Machiavelli and modern politicians, Marxists and others, did not break up religion from politics but tried to present a synthesis of the two. He was a ruler obeyed by millions not because they feared him but because they loved him; not as a master of riches but one holding the spiritual weight which, when it once dares to assert itself, seems to reduce almost to the brink of impotence the natives of the material world. Gandhi led the political movement against the British imperialism which, as a theme occupies a significant place in the Indian English fiction. As a matter of fact, inert Indian

life got itself altered into a life of action and nimbleness. Gandhi by proposing the political philosophy of non-violence had become the natural heir of Indian Independence movement. His political thoughts made him popular among every class of India. His politics was close to the ethos of Indian culture and civilization. It was not a new doctrine but novel in its practice and implementation. After his magnificent success against Rowlatt Bill movement, the British Raj became quite upset. Their diplomacy had failed before Gandhi's political vision.

The imperialists were so horrified that they lost their nerve to see the prodigious following of Gandhi. Then came the atrocious massacre of the Jalianwala Bagh. The imperialist Brigadier General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer brought a black day in history of world civilization on 13th April 1919.

The Jalianwala Bagh genocide and imposition of martial law proves a turning point in Indian Freedom Struggle. Gandhi emerged as an undisputed leader. He was the first authentic mass puller and was acceptable to all sections of the country.

In the words of Bhikhu Parekh:⁸

"At the political level, Gandhi's greatest contribution considered both in building powerful national organization of the kind India had never known and helping create a new political culture. For nearly two decades after its birth the Congress was an essential middle- and upper-middle-class organization functioning with the blessings of the British government and wedded to the methods of constitutional pressure and the goal of creating a liberal democratic polity." (213)

Gandhi ji was convinced that without communal harmony people of India would never achieve the goal of freedom. These Gandhian principles and how these characters reacted to the Gandhian ideology which developed in the previous section 'Love'.

Gandhi publicly brought women from their homes to partake in dharna and agitation on equal terms with their male counterparts. Nahal has also presented the British perspective of Indian struggle. The British had no interest in the natives if they were not harming the interest of the Crown. They never desired that any group should become powerful or strong.

The people who were far away from the effects of the political consciousness generated in India, Gandhi devised a different way to reach them. Gandhi was

aware of the social and economic problems of the country and he knew that people would never become politically conscious, unless they were socially conscious. Social consciousness was the first step to reach the second step of political consciousness. And that is why he advised Sunil to open a khadi store in his village Ajitha; later on he was directed to go to the provincial headquarter of the Congress office at Rohru, a distant place in Simla Hills to resolve the problem between the timber merchants and the laborers.

Gandhi believed in the transformation of the soul of man, as he wanted to induce spiritualism in politics. The British government had put a ban on certain books of Gandhi which included *Hind Swaraj*, a political treatise, *Universal Dawn*, *The Story of a Satyagrahi* and *The Life of Mustafa Kamal Pasha*. Last section of the novel, the most complex section, presents Gandhi as the most undisputed leader during the freedom movement but vehemently criticized by the congressmen and his political opponents for withdrawing the Non-Cooperation Movement after Chauri-Chaura incident.

When the Rowlatt Bill was being rushed through the Imperial Legislature, Gandhi offered the nation his program of Satyagraha. The Jallianwala Bagh episode proved a turning point for the British Raj in India. Many Indians in a deep shock gave up their titles. Rabindra Nath Tagore renounced his Knighthood.

The intellectuals and elite came to know the true persona of the British imperialism. Gandhi encashed this situation and to give impartial news to the public, he started two independent weeklies... which had no truck with the government, *Navjivan* in Gujarati and *Young India* in English. The newspaper was a definite way to make people politically conscious. The suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement by Gandhi gave the chance to the revolutionaries to lead the nation in full swing. For the first time, Gandhi had taken self-exile from politics.

Nahal has deftly woven politics and fiction. In the novels the political personalities like Gandhi, Nehru, Motilal Nehru, Maganlal Gandhi and Edward Prince of Wales have appeared. Kasturba, the wife of Gandhi, also shaped Gandhi's political destiny when he seemed defeated. The brutal figure of General Reginald Dyer has been depicted by the novelist with full details of authenticity.

The Salt of Life covers the second phase of India's freedom movement 1930 to 1941. It is one of the most complex novels as it captures the diverse political consciousness going in different directions of various

political parties and organizations. Inside the Congress, we see the rise of Subhas Chandra Bose who differed radically from Gandhi's political method. The political consciousness of Muslims took the communal color under the banner of The Muslim League.

Ashish Nandy, Gandhi "mobilized the numerically preponderant non-Brahmanic sectors of the Hindus, the lower strata of the society, and the politically passive peripheries: the low castes and the peasants and villagers."⁷

Gandhi was the first cogent devout political thinker in the world politics. He knew very well the sensitive boundary of religion in politics. If he was moving slowly toward his political goals, it was because the people of India were not prepared to fight against the British. When Gandhi decided to break the salt law, the viceroy Lord Irwin laughed at him and thought that Gandhi had lost his sanity due to old age. But the spectacular success of the Salt Satyagraha, made the people understand that the Dandi March was one of the greatest political pilgrimages in the world history.

Thus Gandhi discovered the political strategy to reach every Indian through salt. The aroma of salt charged the political atmosphere. Gandhi realized that "he had at least awakened the conscience of his own people if not his adversaries...."(17)

Gandhi's Salt Movement made a psychological impact on the Indian masses. This movement proved to be a cultural revival and led to religious reformation and search of self-identity. It offered a novel concept to enslave Indians, that they should be proud of their heritage. They were far superior to the British. This march to Dandi was more militant in character as he called it 'civil dis-obedience' rather than non-cooperation. Gandhi's militancy reached its peak. For the first time he became demanding and provocative. "He was cutting his corners square, leaving little room for compromise."(260)

When the news of Gandhi's arrest reached internationally, there were demonstrations all over. Romain Rolland, the Swiss who had written a brief biography of Gandhi, went on a day's fast. George Bernard Shaw planted a sapling in his garden and called it 'Gandhi.' Many mill workers in Lancashire-the very mills Gandhi was agitating against-wore black ribbons on their arms. Charles Chaplin did a brief walk on the pavement outside the house, imitating and dragging a crown behind him with his umbrella. Dr. John Holmes, an American priest, wrote a protest letter to Ramsay MacDonald, the British Premier, signed by one hundred

clergymen. The German, the French, the British, and the American press, instead of relying on the government versions of the events, published signed reports by British and American journalists who happened to be on the scene. The reports sent out to by the American columnist Miller appeared in 1350 newspapers around the world. (263, 264).

The Salt of Life ends with the disappointment of Winston Churchill and the regular defeat of the British forces in Africa.

The Triumph of the Tricolour begins with Gandhi's clarion call of Quit India Movement in 1942. The novelist has also highlighted the consolidated position of the Allied power during the Second World War. The *Lonavala* naval mutiny and the meeting of Gandhi with Jinnah are important events in this novel.

Jinnah had not supported the Congress in the Quit India Movement of 1942. Gandhi wanted that Jinnah should settle the issue of Pakistan after freedom. But Jinnah first claimed Pakistan and then only the freedom for the Nation. Jinnah alleged that Gandhi wanted Hindu rule in independent India and consequently the communalism he generated among Muslims is false. In an interview with Louis Fischer, Gandhi had said that Jinnah's allegation is totally baseless: "He is utterly wrong. That is absurd.... He is speaking like a pettifogging lawyer. Only a maniac resorts to such changes."¹

The difference in the theme and characterization in *Azadi* and other three novels is natural, as they were not conceived to be written as one unit. Nahal admits this while writing, *Writing a Historical Novel* that he was encouraged by the success of *Azadi* to think of writing of the freedom movement in India, in three phases: from 1915–1922, 1930–1941, and Quit India Movement of 1942. It is also the fact that all the three novels testify to the thoughts of the novels. They all conform to the events happening in the face of the freedom struggle. *Azadi* which was published in 1975 and was penned first should be treated independently. It does not have any connection with other novels of *The Gandhi Quartet*, if the 'Epilogue' in *Azadi*, which is merely an appendage, is removed. The character of Lala Kanshi Ram figures in *The Salt of Life* and *The Triumph of the Tricolour*, but his appearance is contrived rather than natural. It seems that the novelist made up his mind to introduce him in these novels without any demand of the story. The themes are also different, whereas *Azadi* is a compact and well made-knit-without the Epilogue-of course, with a great deal of the novelist's attention on the art of characterization. The creation of Pakistan brings a

sociological change in the Indian subcontinent and a large number of Hindus got a new identity of refugees.

This Partition is a political compulsion. Against this backdrop of Partition, all the characters have been marshaled with great skill. The minor characters like Chaudhari Barkat Ali, Munir, Niranjana Singh, Chandini, Nurul Nisar appear only in a few chapters but they are sparkling and leave indelible mark in the minds of readers. Chaudhary Barkat Ali, despite being a Muslim, shows his compassion and love for the Hindus, who were in the grip of horror, loot and murder. The Hindus and Sikhs living in Pakistan were ruined by this Partition. Bibi Amar Vati, the owner of two big buildings in Sialkot, is homeless in Delhi. Sunanda Bala, a Kashmiri Brahmin girl and the daughter-in-law of Bibi Amar Vati, whose looks of posterior is enough to make the Pakistani army captain mad with carnal passions, loses her husband, Suraj Prakash, while coming to India. She works whole night on her sewing machine in her struggle for bread in Delhi. This social and economic change in the society was due to the destructive communal political consciousness which led to the partition of the country. Abdul Ghani is taken over by this communal wave and the venom in him can be witnessed when he felt no remorse at the tragic death of Madhu. The hellish display of naked Hindu girls in Narowal Bazar over which even the Muslim hakim closed his eyes are some of the outstanding depictions by the novelist. Chaman Nahal has brought integration of fact and fiction and raised a heart-rending story of Partition to the level of art.

In the first three volumes, it is Gandhi who dominates the novels. But in *Azadi*, the chief protagonist is Lala Kanshi Ram. The novelist has given only the news of the tragic assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in the few pages of the section 'Aftermath'. Mahatma Gandhi is talked about by the Hindus of Sialkot but he never appears as a character in the novel. Characterization is the focal point of interest in *Azadi*, whereas action is more important in other three novels. Lala Kanshi Ram had no political affinity with Gandhi but he loved him because he was the Mahatma, besides being a political leader and a great man. The character of Kanshi Ram is drawn independently and he attains maturity himself. But the chief protagonist, Sunil, in *The Crown and the Loincloth*, comes to acquire significance only due to Gandhi.

The first three novels should be treated as 'trilogy' because of the close affinity in the theme and development of the events. *Azadi* should be treated as an independent novel. But all the above mentioned novels have one thing in common, i.e., political consciousness. If Nahal would have written 'Epilogue'

combining the first three novels, it would have certain significance. He has written Epilogue after *Azadi* which purports to mean that he is forcing *Azadi* and bypassing its independent status.

The titles of the novels of *The Gandhi Quartet* are also justified. These titles convey the inner thought of the novel. *Azadi* speaks about the Mahatma as a white-clad saint and the mighty Empire. *The Salt of Life* evokes the idea of the famous Dandi March of Mahatma Gandhi. Only *The Triumph of the Tricolour* has an ambiguous meaning. It speaks about the triumph of the Congress flag but one may perceive it as the triumph of the national flag.

The subtitles of the novels are symbolic. His first volume *The Crown and the Loincloth* is divided into three sections, titled-‘love’, ‘Perspective’ and ‘Affirmation’. ‘Love’ signifies the multiplicity of love of different characters diverging in different directions. ‘Perspective’ presents the perception of several characters which they held during the freedom struggle. ‘Affirmation’ demands the fresh declaration by Kusum to follow her husband’s footprints who sacrificed his life for the sake of Gandhian principles. The subtitles of the novel *The Salt of Life* are also divided into three sections namely ‘Whisper’, ‘Temper’ and ‘Choice’. Whisper speaks about the silent political atmosphere which prevailed after the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement. ‘Temper’ captures the volatile atmosphere of the country which was created after the declaration of Gandhi’s Salt-Satyagraha. ‘Choice’ speaks about the choice of the political leaders and revolutionaries who had selected to emancipate the country from the British thralldom. *The Triumph of the Tricolour* is also notable for the subtitles namely, ‘Defiance’, ‘Constraints’ and ‘Release’. ‘Defiance’ captures the volatile political situation of the country after the declaration of 1942 Quit India Movement. It also speaks about the defiance of the British rule by Indian people. ‘Constraints’ captures the idea of diverging views of different political parties. ‘Release’ prepares the ground to free the nation from foreign yoke. *Azadi*, which is also divided into three sections, has very suggestive subtitles-‘Lull’, ‘Storm’ and ‘Aftermath’. These are suggestive and capture the holocaust of partition.

It is noteworthy that all the novels of Chaman Nahal discussed above are divided into three sections. It seems that Nahal has used the musical technique: ascent, climax and descent.

All the four novels are combined by an ‘Epilogue’. All the four novels capture the political spirit of the nation and

give a clear picture of the political personalities of the freedom movement and also the English rule.

However, ‘Epilogue’ seems to affect the popularity and widespread appeal of *Azadi*. Epilogue gives the information about almost all the characters depicted in the novel. It gives the information about the marriage of Amit with Padamrai Kranti’s daughter Shalini. Though Kusum disliked her but she agreed to the proposal before the choice of Amit. Julie, the wife of Vikram is an M.P. from Ajmer. Vikram is devoted to the Gandhian philosophy. Lala Kanshi Ram is trying to overcome the tragic demise of his daughter Madhu. Arun has become a journalist and he also seldom takes wine. But he is sincere toward his parents. Ginger Barnes is married to Colonel Alan Cutlass after taking divorce from David Barnes. She settled in London. David Barnes is an ICS officer after Independence.

Nahal has depicted all the political stalwarts of the time ranging from the Congress to the Muslim League. His novels have embodied the political personality of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Motilal Nehru and several others. But it is astonishing that Nahal has forgotten an established leader of the depressed class Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar’s political objectives have not been taken into account. There were also political differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar concerning British Premier Mac. Donald’s communal award. Later, the tangle was resolved. At least, Nahal should have presented Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar as a political personality in the novel *The Salt of Life*. Except Ambedkar all important political personalities have been depicted by the novelist with full sincerity.

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