

HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION CHAMAN NAHAL'S AZADI

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ABSTRACT

A distinctive novel characterized by an exploration of the relationship between history and fiction, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* expresses a strong consciousness of the fictiveness of all discourse about history and reality. The paper is an attempt to study *Azadi* in the postmodern perspective and to attempt the application and utility of the post-modern critical concepts like historiographic metafiction to historical novels. It is not only a recreation of a historical event but an imaginative revisioning of a historical epoch. Indian freedom movement and the consequent emergence of the two states, Pakistan and India, acquired a huge dimension in the history of South Asia. The focus of the novel is the socio-political concerns of the era. It leaves an impact of being more than a historical novel in which historical sense and reality enter into the sphere of art imperceptibly.

KEYWORDS: Communal Emergence, Epoch, Historical, Metafiction, Struggle

INTRODUCTION

A majority of novels in India have been written in response to historical movements or events such as the Gandhian movement, imperial rule, partition of the country, the emergence of the New India. The heroic effort to throw away the foreign yoke was an epic struggle covering the first half of the twentieth century. The struggle was long and grueling. It caught the imagination of the entire nation, no less the Indo- English writers. No significant writer could escape the impact of the mighty movement sweeping the country. Historians and literary artists have traditionally played significant roles in all national revolutions of the world. Not only do they reach the minds of the people through their writings, they also subject every institution of the society to a specific political philosophy.

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* is a monumental novel that makes a specific use of history of the same period, painting deftly a moving saga of the division of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan, and the accompanying disaster that hit these two newly-declared independent countries in 1947. The paper also attempts to study the same in the light of the Western postmodernist theory as a work of historiographic metafiction in which historical sense and reality enter into the sphere of art imperceptibly.

Historiographic metafiction is a term originally coined by literary theorist Linda Hutcheon. According to Hutcheon, in "A Poetics of Postmodernism", works of historiographic metafiction are "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages"(Hutcheon 122). Historiographic metafiction is a quintessentially postmodern art form, with reliance upon textual play, parody and historical re-conceptualization. It is a kind of postmodern novel which rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts the specificity and particularity of the individual past event. It also suggests

a distinction between events and facts that is one shared by many historians. Since the documents become signs of events, which the historian transmutes into facts, as in historiographic metafiction, the lesson here is that the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted. Finally, Historiographic metafiction often points to the fact by using the paratextual conventions of historiography to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations. (Hutcheon 123)

A distinctive novel characterized by an exploration of the relationship between history and fiction, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* expresses a strong consciousness of the fictiveness of all discourse about history and reality. An attempt to analyse *Azadi* in the postmodern perspective will help to appreciate his craftsmanship better and to judge the utility and feasibility of applying the Western critical concepts like historiographic metafiction to historical novels. It chooses the issues of the past not nostalgically but critically, it contains a deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational elements, and above all, private experiences are elevated skillfully to public consciousness.

Nahal calls "Azadi as a hymn to one's land of birth, rather than a realistic novel of partition." (Nahal p.40). He elaborates by saying that this fact "does not absolve the novelist's obligation to history; paradoxically, it increases that obligation, where the novelist should be able to dramatize actual events. For historical fiction to carry a deeper meaning, it must succeed at the realistic level first." (Nahal p.41)

The novel opens with an important date, June 3, 1947, when the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten was going to make an important announcement regarding the freedom granted to India and the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Through the fortunes of one single family, that of Lala Kanshi Ram, the writer portrays a vivid picture of the evils of imperialism. The announcement comes and the people listen to the news of partition with bated breath. The people of Punjab in general and of Sialkot in particular who were until then only Punjabis and who "spoke a common tongue, wore identical clothes, and responded to the weather, to the heats and the first rains, in an identical manner," (Nahal, *Azadi*, p.48) suddenly become conscious of their religious and ethnic roots, of their being Hindus or Muslims, of their belonging to the majority or minority communities. The feeling of hostility naturally runs high all over the north western and eastern regions of India.

The situation in Sialkot worsens, and events take place with monstrous rapidity and suddenness. In the sickening climate of communal bitterness and hatred, even the pure and profound Arun-Nur love relationship ceases to be a private love affair and acquires communal or political overtones. Close and devoted friends as Arun and Munir too feel "a tension towards each other." With the influx of the Muslims into the city, crying hoarse their tales of woe and destruction at the hands of Hindus on the other side of the border, communal tension mounts up in Sialkot, and what were at first only sporadic acts of murder and looting subsequently explode into massive and organized violence by the Muslims. A sizable majority of the Hindu families of Sialkot shift to the newly set up refugee camp for safety, and those residing in Bibi Amarvati's two houses on the Fort Street also move there on August 2, 1947 under the leadership of Lala Kanshi Ram. This stay however turns out to be brief and deluding, for what happens to them in the course of their journey to the Indian border is incredibly painful and humiliating.

The people of the Punjab in general and of Sialkot in particular who were until then only Punjabis and who spoke a common tongue wore identical clothes, and responded to the weather, to the heat and the first rains, in an identical manner, suddenly become conscious of their religious and ethnic roots, of their being Hindus or Muslims, of their belonging to the majority or minority communities. The feeling of hostility naturally runs high all over the north-western

and eastern regions of India. What happens in Sialkot and the neighbouring areas thereafter becomes the tale of every village and town in the affected region.

In the Muslim-dominated city of Sialkot, which was until a few days ago a picture of peace and amity and co-operation among the Muslims and the Hindus and the Sikhs, all being the children of the same soil, the Muslims celebrate the news of partition and the creation of Pakistan with the bursting of crackers and illuminations and processions. In their own turn the Hindus and the Sikhs think only of how to defend themselves against the impending attacks of the frenzied and fanatical mobs of Muslims. Not unnaturally, the division of the country on a blatantly communal basis does bring about a psychological wedge, an emotional and spiritual rift among the civil police and military personnel of undivided India. Everything looks so confused, so uncertain, so tense and grim. In this sickening climate of communal bitterness and hatred even the pure and profound Arun-Nur love-relationship ceases to be a private, personal affair, and, almost in spite of them, it comes to acquire communal or political overtones. And such close and devoted friends as Arun and Munir too feel "a tension towards each other." (Nahal, Azadi p.118)

The situation in Sialkot worsens, and events take place with monstrous rapidity and suddenness. With the influx of the Muslims into the city, crying hoarse their tales of woe and destruction at the hands of the Hindus on the other side of the border, communal tension mounts up in Sialkot and what were at first only sporadic acts of murder and looting and arson subsequently explode in massive and organized violence by the Muslims. A sizable majority of the Hindu families of Sialkot shift to the newly set up refugee camp for safety, and those residing in Bibi Amar Vati's two houses on the Fort Street do also move there on August 2, 1947, under Lala Kanshi Ram's leadership. This lull in their lives, however, turns out to be only brief and deluding, for what happens to them in the course of their journey to the Indian border is incredibly painful and humiliating. The foot convoy, including Lala Kanshi Ram, his wife, Prabha Rani, and their son, Arun Padmini and her daughter, Chandni; Bibi Amar Vati, her son, Suraj Prakash, and daughter-in-law, Sunanda Bala, and their children, Bhavna and Nava Kant; Sardar Teja Singh and his daughter, Isher Kaur, and thousands and thousands of others, leaves Sialkot for Dera Baba Nanak on September 24, 1947. It passes through Gunna Kalan, Pasrur, Qila Sobha Singh, Manjoke and Narowal, through "a living inferno" (Nahal, Azadi, p.221) as it were, through a human limbs and skeletons route littered with dismembered discarded clothes, turbans and female headgear, battered steel trunks, umbrellas and walking sticks, and by the time it reaches the Indian border it is only a "demoralized mass of humanity." (Nahal, Azadi, p.317) With Suraj Prakash having been killed and Chandni abducted by the Muslim marauders, what is left of Lala Kanshi Ram's team, all shattered and dazed, comes to Amritsar, and from there it moves on to Delhi where, in the face of severe ordeals, the families settle down to piece together the bits of their precarious existence.

The pointed reference to the *Mahabharata* and Kurukshetra is an ingenious hint at the destruction and chaos that nearly engulfed India at the time of partition. (Jha p.125) The birth of Isher Kaur's child in the land of the dead, however, suggests that though at times death swamps life, life regenerates and reasserts itself. Life is indeed a self-perpetuating phenomenon. Lala Kanshi Ram has seen both the Hindus and the Muslims committing enormous crimes in the name of religion. He has ceased to hate the Muslims. The assassination of Gandhi by a Hindu is a convincing confirmation of his opinion. "We are all equally guilty," (Nahal, Azadi, p.335) says he and though his wife does not agree with him, he asserts that it is through love and forgiveness alone that human beings can wipe off their sins. If this world contains such demonic creatures as Abdul Ghani, Inayat-Ullah Khan and Captain Rahmat-Ullah Khan it does also contain such enlightened beings as Bill Davidson, Chaudhry Barkat Ali and the Hakim of Narowal who prays to Allah and weeps for the naked Hindu women being paraded in the local streets. The lines from Tagore, serving as the motto of *Azadi*,

constitute a prayer for man's commitment to reason and truth, for his redemption. *Azadi* has three parts: the Lull, the Storm, the Aftermath. Each one of these titles bears tremendous psychological significance, and taken together they do form a meaningful sequence. It is, perhaps, not at all difficult to see that from the lull of suspense and stupor, the novel gets into the storm of communal orgy that leaves its visible impact, as aftermath, on the last part of the book.

The novel is replete with morbid silences, frightening noises and graphic descriptions of human indignity and brutality. In a sombre drama of mass murders and mass rapes, we encounter a number of characters among which Lala Kanshi Ram stands apart. He is painfully conscious of the fact that freedom or *Azadi* has been achieved at the cost of enormous sufferings and hardships to people. He sees years of blankness and desolation ahead.

CONCLUSIONS

Azadi may be compared with Mulk Raj Anand's *Death of a Hero*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, K.A. Abbas's *Inquilab*, Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Ahmad Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, but it may be said unequivocally that Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* is an epoch-making book which describes not only the terror and tumult that accompanied, in fact, darkened, the attainment of freedom in 1947 but does also envisage man's *Azadi* or freedom from beastliness, from moral, psychological and spiritual malady.

It addresses the historic event not just nostalgically but also critically. Individual consciousness is deftly raised to public consciousness through the projection of characters. The novel is an imaginative revisioning of the historical epoch possessing features of the post-modern form labeled as historiographic metafiction.

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