

Chaman Nahal's Azadi: A Saga of Women Exploitation

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“Abstract”—Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* depicts the catastrophic episodes of sexual violence of women during the partition of subcontinent in 1947. Bifurcation of Indian subcontinent became a tale of woe—a monstrous holocaust, mass rape, massive destruction, arson and communal violence, sexual rivalry over the possession of women, abduction and murder. Nahal exposes the brutal fact that in any kind of conflict, war, communal riots, holocaust or partition, it is the women who have suffered the most. *Azadi* portrays the realistic and historical documentation of the atrocities faced by countless women in the aftermath of communal divide. The partition brought communal violence which shattered the peace and harmony of both the nations. *Azadi* is a novel of graphic representation of human identity and brutality, mass murders, large scale abduction, mass rape and parade of naked women etc. Among these the parade of nude Hindu and Sikh women in Sialkot and of Muslim women in Indian Punjab is the most horrifying scene of the novel. Though India has progressed a lot since independence, women still remain vulnerable. Even today the women become the easy source of humiliation in any kind of conflict, war or communal riots. Violation of woman's chastity is an attack on her family and on the community to which she belongs. These distressing and horrendous atrocities can be overcome by practicing humanity. This paper is an attempt to analyze the aspects of exploitation and atrocities against women during the catastrophic partition.

Keywords: Catastrophic Partition, violence, Atrocities, Humanity, Trauma, Rape, Abduction, Vulnerable.

“Introduction”

From the ancient period, the women suffered a lot on the name of rituals and traditions. There were some practices, formulated by the patriarchal society i.e. child marriage, pardah-system and above more the Sati system that were followed by the women willingly or unwillingly. United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender based violence that result in physical sexual or mental harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.¹

When the people are at daggers drawn, they aim at humiliating the men of other community by molesting their women. Man is the victim of time and history but the women is of the man of course. It is an established fact that the women are considered as the most vulnerable. Violence

experienced by women followed the similar pattern of sexual assault, retaliation and reprisal in any kind of war, conflict and holocaust. They are sexually abused, brutally beaten by their masters, kidnapped and spoiled as the clay toys by violent men. With the passage of time everything has become changed but the condition of women is still wretched. Even today they fall prey to the bloody violence.

Chaman Nahal was one of the most important literary figures, writing about the chaotic partition, he has eight novels to his credit. His novels in chronological order are as follows: *My True Faces* (1973), *Azadi*(1975), *Into Another Dawn*(1977), *The English Queens*(1979), *The Crown and the Lioncloth* (1981), *Sunrise in Fiji* (1988), *The Salt of Life* (1990) and *The Triumph of Tricolour* (1992). *Azadi* is the masterpiece novel of Nahal that brought the prestigious Sahitya Akadmi Award in 1977 to his name. The novel covers the period of eight months from the announcement of partition up to the period of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. In between he drew the cruel picture of atrocities against women. The story of the novel revolves round a well-to-do Hindu grain merchant, Lala Kanshi Ram and his family. The novel is divided into three parts namely: 1. Lull, 2. Storm and 3. Aftermath that symbolizes the historical occurrence of partition as the first part shows how the people of Sialkot were living together peacefully but the announcement of partition brought a drastic change into the life of common people. All of a sudden the peace and harmony wore the garb of a violent storm of calamity and disaster in the form of murders, abduction and rape etc. After this havoc the people who survived any how had to face the innumerable calamities as they lost their belongings, their identity, their family and above all these things their morale and strength. *Azadi* depicts a blend of realities of the best and worst time that had been witnessed by the common man. Nahal described in detail his characters with their love, relation faith, humanity as well as sufferings, snatching, rape, murders, anguish and chaos. The communal frenzy was provoked after the declaration of partition. India became free but divided into two sovereign countries, into major and minor and into different communities as well.

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* exposes the photographic detail of the catastrophic occurrence of partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947. It is the most comprehensive presentation of the trauma of partition. Chaman Nahal was also the victim of arson and he had to migrate from Sialkot to India so his description of the consequences of the partition is quite remarkable. Being a refugee Chaman Nahal wrote with profound interest and realism about the chaotic partition. Through the character of Lala Kanshi Ram, the protagonist of the novel and his son Arun, Nahal expressed his personal bitter experiences of those cruel days of turmoil. Partition on communal ground has made a deep chasm that is presented in *Azadi* comprehensively. The announcement of partition disturbed the peace and harmony of Sialkot and the other bordering areas of both the nations. It was the June 24th of 1947 when everybody was impatient to hear the announcement of partition. When the Viceroy announced that the Indian subcontinent would have two nations out of one, all the listeners in Bibi Amar Vati's house become dumb stricken as Sialkot would be the part of Muslim dominating northern state named Pakistan and being Hindu and Sikh, they all had to migrate to India a Hindu predominating southern state. For Muslims it was an event for celebration meanwhile the Hindus and Sikhs were in terrible condition. Only Lalaji was the man who had faith in Gandhi that he would not agree for the partition. By creed he was a Hindu nationalist who lived in Sialkot and loved that place. He hoped to live there as it was his motherland:

I suppose we'll continue here. Why can't Hindus and Sikhs live in Pakistan? Why should they wish us harm?... Well, why can't we live in Pakistan? They certainly would like to have us...²

Padmini expressed her terror before Lala Kanshi Ram, "Lalaji, they might dishonor us!"³ For Muslims the creation of a separate nation for them was an event of celebration, being overjoyed they shouted 'Pakistan zindabad. Long live Pakistan.' But the Hindus and Sikhs were in terrible condition. Soon after the celebration the Muslims became violent and they started looting and burning one Hindu mohalla every night and killing the Hindus and Sikhs mercilessly. People sadly realized the freedom brought nothing but the untold miseries followed by uncertain future. It is said that the Muslim refugees came to Sialkot from India in a miserable and heartbroken condition with many stories of molestation and massacre by the Hindus and the Sikhs. In the mean time a train full of murdered and wounded Muslims reached Sialkot that provoked the Muslims for more violence, resulting in massive destruction, mass rape, abduction and murders etc.

"Atrocities against women during Partition"

Azadi is a tale of woe which describes how women were treated during partition. It portrays the realistic picture of mass murder, exploitation, destruction, humiliation and above more violence against women. Partition resulted in the monstrous

holocaust over women. Being the most vulnerable men humiliate the others using feminine words as abuses "seducer of your sister... seducer of your mother" to humiliate the men without considering the dignity of a women. For their modesty and vulnerability women became the victim of any war, conflict or holocaust that makes them morally feeble, Nur certified this by saying:

I'm a girl and am defenseless and cannot force my will on my family and because you are a man, more independent than me, and I expect you to defend me ...!⁴

When we read the novel we actually feel horrified and ashamed of the wretched condition of women during partition. The second part of the novel titled as Storm actually brought the giant disaster and havoc in the lives of women of that time. Here Nahal exposes his anguish over the pitiable condition of the helpless women. When the Muslim mob attacked the foot convoy many women lost their children, their husband and above more their honour and dignity due to the monstrous partition. Thousands of women were abducted, raped in public and finally murdered. Some were forced to be the additional wife of Muslim man and some others were used as plaything. As the novelist wrote:

The survivors were retained for repeated rapes and humiliations, until they were parceled out to decrepit wrecks- the aged, the leftovers who could not find a wife, or those Muslims who wanted an additional wife. In the meantime more women were abducted and cycle was repeated all over again.⁵

In the same way in Shauna's *What the Body Remembers*, Roope pleads:

See me not as a vessel, a plaything, a fantasy, a maid, servant, an ornament, but⁶

Khushwant Singh like Chaman Nahal and S.B.Shauna, portrayed the similar expression in *Train to Pakistan* when Jugga said,

Bholeya, I hear a lot women are being abducted and sold cheap. You could find a wife yourself.⁷

And further the novelist wrote that man does not bother for the miseries of women as Jugga did not hesitate to say,

If Nooran was killed, he would pick up another girl.⁸

Rape is another powerful weapon for humiliating the women to take revenge for the man of other community. Sunanda Bala the daughter-in-law of Bibi Amar Vati, was kidnapped and raped by Captain Rahmat-Ullah Khan. She was so much distressed that she thought,

What is there left of me to lose.⁹

It is difficult to describe in words, the extent to which the Hindu and Sikhs women felt humiliated in Pakistan after the geographical divide of Indian subcontinent. They were

oppressed badly; it seems as if their bodies were being torn apart by the cruel butchers. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* portrays the bitter experiences of violence against women during the bifurcation of India in 1947. The atrocities like rape and abduction has become the taboos for women surviving the trauma of partition, in another novel named *Ice-Candy Man* Bapsi Sidhwa describes how Ayah became the victim of brutal violence,

The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against her propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces.¹⁰

Through the character of Lenny Bapsi Sidhwa highlights atrocities against women at all levels: domestic issues, violence, rape, kidnapping etc. In Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* Sundari, daughter of Hukum Chand also became the victim of same pattern of violence:

There was Sundari, the daughter of Hukum Chand.... The mob made love to her. She did not have to take off any of her bangles. They were all smashed as she lay in the road, being taken by one man and another and another.¹¹

Besides these pathetic scenes there was most horrifying and tragic portrayal of the Parade of nude Hindu and Sikh women in Trunk Bazaar. The Muslims abducted a large number of women from the foot convoy. When the news of procession reached the refugee camps it shattered Lala's strength but Lalaji was still hopeful about those abducted girls and he said, "I hope they don't parade the girls they took away from our convoy."¹² (p. 247). But it seems as if the humanity had drained out of the blood of the Muslim mobs. Besides the Muslims Suraj Prakash and Arun also became the part of the crowd, gathered to humiliate the women marching in the parade. But soon Arun felt uncomfortable and so much ashamed that he set down under shop- front feebly. But Suraj Prakash did not bother much which proves that men are men and nothing can tame their sensuous and mischievous desires. All the roads were packed with hysterical men wearing plain shirts and lungis. They all were waiting for the profession with extreme sensuality and revenge. When the procession reached:

Arun counted them. There were forty women, marching two abreast. Their ages varied from sixteen to thirty, although, to add to the grotesqueness of the display, there were two women marching right at the end of the column, two must have been over sixty. They were all stark naked. Their heads were completely shaven; so were their armpits. So were their pubic regions. Shorn of their body hair and clothes, they looked like baby girls, or like the bald embryos one sees preserved in methylated spirit. Only the breasts and the hips gave away the age. The women walked awkwardly, looking only at the ground. They were all crying, though their eyes shed no tears. Their faces were formed into grimaces and they were sobbing. Their arms were free, but so badly had they been used, so wholly their spirits crushed, their morale

shattered, none of them made any attempt to cover themselves with their hands. They swung their arms clumsily, often out of coordination with their legs. The bruises on their bodies showed they had been beaten and men handled. Their masters walked beside them and if any of the women sagged or hung behind, they prodded her along with the whips they carried.¹³

The scene was lascivious for the mob but nobody tried to molest the women. It seems as if the evil itself had incarnated in the streets of Sialkot. They all were crying without tears in their eyes and burst into severe sobbing. They felt much oppressed that is why they did no efforts to conceal their body. The writer was deeply moved by the procession of naked women in Sialkot and declared that the procession was not only the procession but a stream of profanity and humiliation:

The procession moved through the bazaar, and along with the procession moved the a river of obscenities- foul abuses, crude personal gestures, spurts of sputum, odd articles like small coins, faded flowers, cigarette butts and bidis that were thrown at the women. As soon as the women came near, that section of crowd became hysterical.¹⁴

Nahal narrates the barbarous cruelties heaped on women during the partition in the form of abduction, sexual violence, mass rape and marches of naked women. *Azadi* is the representation of the crisis of mass rapes, humiliation and molestation of Hindu and Sikh women in the Pakistan and in Indian Punjab the same practices were done with Muslim women. The experiences of Lala Kanshi Ram were extremely painful at the refugee camp. He became numb hearing the news of his daughter and son-in-law's death in the train massacre. He felt embarrassed when reached India as what was done with their ladies in Pakistan, is being done with the Muslim women in India. Commenting on Nahal's portrayal of the horrid scenes of inexplicable violence, K.K.Sharma and B.K.Johri writes:

Azadi portrays vividly the horrors of the partition, the colossal violence that still haunts the Indian psyche.¹⁵

"Humanity: A Strong Weapon Against violence"

Nahal shows the robust cruelty as well as ardent humanity of both sides. *Azadi* is a realistic and graphic record of the horrible incidents caused by the catastrophic partition. The rumours fanned the flames to communal frenzy that violated the peaceful atmosphere of Sialkot. Suddenly the friends turned into foes. The Novel exposes how the women and their lives were made tools and toys in the hands of man. The Novelists did not criticize the people of one religion against other and presents a deliberate contamination of the historical facts. Bifurcation of Indian subcontinent disturbed the peace and harmony of the people and the novelist explores the trauma of partition with ardent sympathy and humanity and criticize the atrocious violence against women. The novelist did not fail to describe humanity which surpasses all the woes and draws our attention towards hakim sahib. When the

procession of naked women was before his shop, the Hakim sahib was so ashamed of that heinous activity of Muslims. He prays for the protection of those women and the scene becomes the threshold of humanity:

The hakim sahib had covered his face with his hands and was rocking a little and he was saying, Allah, Allah, Allah! And then he knelt on his knees raised his arms and spread his hands before him as while saying nammaaz. There was the look of infinite pain on his face. His thin, frail eyelids rested on his eyes as if they would never open again. And moving his outstretched hands, like begging alms, he murmured in Punjabi, 'Rabbul- Alamin, forgive these cruel man. And, oh, my Allah, oh Rabbah, protect these women!'¹⁶

Likewise the friendship of Chaudhary Barkat Ali and Lala Kanshi Ram proves to be the symbol of multicultural harmony that cannot be shattered by any kind of turmoil. Chaudhary Barkat Ali helped Lala Kanshi Ram to make his way easy and safe to the refugee camp and expresses his sorrow on the death of Madhu, the daughter of Lala Kanshi Ram. Humanity cannot be the victim of time and situation. When the foot convoy reached Jassar, another Muslim village,

The refugees were scared. But so pitiable was the sight of this demoralized mass of humanity, which moved on its way accompanied by a swarm of flies, the Muslims in Jassar only stood and stared. Even anti- Hindu or anti-Sikh slogans were not shouted by them.... Instead of attacking the convoy, some of the inhabitants of Jassar ran inside their home homes and brought water for the thirsty. Some waved and said 'Khuda Hafiz.'¹⁷

When Lala Kanshi Ram reached Indian Punjab, his inner soul was broken badly, seeing the similar kind of atrocities against Muslim women and the train loaded with Muslim corpses. Though "The death of Madhu brings him to end of his hopes,"¹⁸ he still "is convinced of the futility of hatred, he resolves not to hate anyone."¹⁹ He told his wife Prabha Rani that both the sides were cursed to bear the atrocious catastrophe of partition so he cannot hate anyone as "hatred brings nothing. Forgiveness alone will help restore normality."²⁰ He urged for the forgiveness from Muslims also to establish peace, harmony as well.

“Conclusion”

Nahal shows how people of different communities have been living together peacefully before the announcement of

partition. Partition resulted in monstrous holocaust bringing woe and misery to the common man. Many years have passed since the bifurcation of Indian subcontinent still both the nations are deadlocked over the issues of possession of Kashmir. Partition left behind a number of scars of great massacre. Even today the identical killings, rape and murders are being committed to take revenge in war conflict and communal clashes. Nahal successfully projected the catastrophic description of rapes, abduction, and violation of women chastity. The novelists present the real picture of the trauma, anguish, pain, over the pathetic condition of women during partition. Violence against women is rooted in gender-based discrimination and gender stereotypes. A strong focus should be placed on gender equality, women's empowerment and awareness of human rights and the most important is to incarnate humanity that can make the women safer. Today the condition of women is not much different as they become the easy target of humiliation. Nahal ended his novel with a note that these horrible atrocities can be abolished only through practicing humanity and forgiveness.

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