

# Gandhian Heroism in Chaman Nahal's 'The Gandhi Quartet'

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**Abstract**—Gandhian values such as love, truth, non-violence, rectitude, endurance and courage have been exposed by many authors in their own ways but no writer has written as extensively as Chaman Nahal did. Though Nahal did not make Gandhi the protagonist of *The Gandhi Quartet* yet his fictional characters revolve around the valiant heroism of Gandhi. In *Azadi* Lala Kanshi Ram represents the Gandhian values as Sunil and Kusum Rani do in other novels of *The Gandhi Quartet*. Gandhian heroism plays the crucial role in the plot construction of his novels. The realistic and candid representation of Gandhian heroism transformed Nahal's fictional characters namely; Kusum, Sunil and Lala Kanshi Ram, from common to the heroic. With the help of these characters Chaman Nahal wants to spread the Gandhian heroism among the readers to inculcate the Gandhian values e.g. love, truth, non-violence, courage and tolerance so that the cosmic unity and peace among the people may be established. Among these prominent fictional characters Kusum Rani plays a significant role in three volumes of *The Gandhi Quartet*: *The Crown and the Lioncloth*, *The Salt of Life* and *The Triumph of Tricolour*. Though Nahal's women characters are obsequiously submissive to men yet Kusum Rani proves to be the epitome of Gandhian heroism as he addressed her as 'Gandhian Kusum'.

**Keywords:** Satyagrah, fictional, gherao, influenced, lathicharge, revolutionaries etc.

The eternal human values have been taught by the Gita, the Quran, by Buddha and Christ in different ways, which are reiterated by Gandhi who became the epitome of love, truth and nonviolence along with many contemporary issues like untouchability, multicultural harmony, women empowerment etc. A. Subha Rayadu pointed out:

Gandhian ideology is rooted in the eternal human values handed down to us over centuries such as truth, righteousness, non-violence and tolerance... Gandhian ideology also accommodates a number of contemporary issues like untouchability, communal violence, rural poverty and the state of women in society.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhiji was of the view that simplicity and truth can make everyone a hero as Disha pointed out that there are- 'Three main qualities that defined Gandhi as hero are his strong leadership, simplicity and bravery.'<sup>2</sup> In India Gandhiji has been the central historical figure of freedom movement and his ideology made him the most significant part of Indian English

Fiction. Mulraj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya Chaman Nahal and many other prominent writers exposed the Gandhian values in their own ways and tried to give creative expression to the impact of Gandhi and his heroism on the layman. Among these writers Chaman Nahal wrote about Gandhi so extensively and realistically that his Quartet became the milestone of catering the Gandhian heroism. Nahal's *The Gandhi Quartet* is the fictionalisation the three important phases of India's freedom movement- The Non Co-operation Movement 1920-22, The Civil Disobedience Movement 1930-31 and the Quit India movement of 1942 along with a moving account of the bifurcation of Indian sub-continent into two independent nations namely India and Pakistan. The Gandhi Quartet constitutes of *The Crown and the Lioncloth*, about the first mass movement to set India free, *The Salt of life* dealing with the epoch-making Dandi March, and *The Triumph of Tricolour* concerned with the Quit India movement and *Azadi*, the most prominent novel is about the saga of partition and its cruel impact on the minority. Though Gandhi is the leading figure of the Quartet yet he is not presented as protagonist. In his Quartet Nahal portrayed nearly two hundred characters belonging to different ethnic groups that are over shadowed by the towering personality of Gandhi. Nahal depicts the historical characters- Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jinnah, Bhagat Singh, Dyer, Mount batten and Kasturbai but the plot of his Gandhi Quartet revolves around the Gandhian influence on the fictional families of Kusum and Lala Kanshi Ram. Nahal projected his male characters at the macro level and female at the micro level. Besides this the fictional female characters like Kusum, Sunanda, Abha, Rehana played the significant role. In his novels the lives of women characters change according to the changes of the lives of male characters. Though Nahal presented Kusum as a subservient character over shadowed by Sunil and Vikram, she became the most prominent women character carrying forward the Gandhian heroism.

Chaman Nahal's Kusum Rani, widow of a Gandhian devotee Sunil Kumar and wife of Raja Vishal Chand of Lambini, represents the Gandhian heroism. It was Sunil, Thakur Shanti Nath's son who first talked about Gandhiji's great hartal. Kusum was impressed with the evolution of Gandhian Era.

When Gandhi came to Amritsar to attend the Congress Annual Session Sunil found a new sphere for him. Influenced by Gandhian values he set up the Khadi Bhandar in Ajitha to promote the swadeshi khaddar. Being the wife she helped Sunil in spinning and began to wear Khadi herself with the passage of time Sunil becomes a strong devotee of Gandhi. When the Prince of Wales came to India, the Indian revolutionaries tried to murder him but Sunil saved his life by scarifying his own for the sake of Gandhian values deep rooted in him. On his sacrifice, the British Government offered a pension for his widow Kusum and free education for Vikram, his orphaned son as gratitude, but Kusum did not accept the offerings rather went to Sarwarmati Ashram with her son, where she became a real model of virtues. For about six years she worked as a Nun and did her duty sincerely and efficiently that brought her close to Gandhiji and other ashramities. Nahal wrote;

This woman from the Punjab had been Gandhi's model of virtue, continence and forbearance for the last seven years. When she had first appeared at Sabarmati after the death of her husband, she looked so sullen, even belligerent. Yet soon enough she had adjusted herself to the routine of the ashram.<sup>3</sup>

During Gandhi's imprisonment she included new branches of education at Sawarmati School such as 'carpentry, clay-modelling, tailoring, painting, music' and the most important is 'agriculture' and titled that education as Basic Education that was later adopted by Gandhiji. The way Kusum treated Marcia, the Spanish women, impressed Gandhiji and Raja Vishal Chand of Lambini so much that Raja Vishal Chand fell in love with her.

Nahal's *The Salt of life* deals with the historical Dandi March with a fictional description about how Gandhiji conceived the idea of Salt Agitation. One day Kusum was teaching about metals and how the mineral called salt, the essential ingredient of food, can be get out of sea water by evaporation that discussion of Kusum became the motive for Gandhiji's new agitation. Soon after that Raja Vishal Chand expressed his love for Kusum and in the presence of Gandhi and Kasturbai they were married in Sawarmati Ashram, leaving Vikram in Gandhi's custody as a token for her service to Gandhi and nation, she went to Lambini with Raja Vishal Chand without giving up the desire to serve the nation as a Satyagrahi. When she was leading a happy married life at Lambini, the news of her mother's illness reached her, she went to Wazirabad to see her. In the mean time she heard the news of Gandhi's arrest for breaking the Salt Law at Dandi and Vikram's injury during the lathicharge. Kusum rushed to see her son so she got ready for Dandi. Raja Vishal Chand sent Angela Davis to accompany her when Kusum and Angela Davis reached the railway station they found their reserved seats were occupied by Percy Wand and Jennifer thinking that they were superior to Indians and deserves the accommodation first. Though Angela and some officers tried to vacant the reserved coupe but they denied on this Kusum boldly said that the seats were 'reserved for us and you must get out.' Meanwhile Kusum

heard people were saying that the lady who had been prevented from travelling is Kaka's mother—'Mahatma's Kaka'. Hearing there words Kusum realized,

"...she was getting to know herself – what she was, what she wanted. Once she thought motherhood to be the epitome of womanhood , ... the woman as shakti before whom even the great Shiva yielded...the woman as Shakti, as an intense vital flame of molten lava, demanding her rights and as Kusum turned along with the crowd to go to the head of the train... forgave Sunil, she forgave Rehana, she forgave her mother, she forgave her father for what or who was walking with that milling crowd now was no longer Kusum, no longer a woman, she was all women mankind had even known or was likely to know, she was an embodiment, a typification, an exemplification of womanhood, ... Kusum the Shakti would lead these multitudes today against the might of the empire, and she loosened her hair and spread it on her shoulders like a goddess, yes, Kusum the Shakti would stand alone on the track, unaided by anything ...."<sup>4</sup>

Slowly the crowd seized the illegally occupied coupe and shouted against the salt law vigourously by lightening a huge coudren to break the salt law and with a passage of time, 'Dandi reached Punjab.' This kind of Satyagrah by Kusum ran a new wave into the freedom movement of Gandhiji, 'at this crowd began to raise slogans, 'Bharat Mata ki Jai', 'Kusum didi Zindabad', 'British Raj Murdabad' and the Frontier Mail couldn't move until the reserved coupe was vacated for Kusum's family. In spite of her mother's death and her miscarriage she proved to be a lady of strong will who after her short recovery accepted Gandhi's proposal to go to Landon as a member of Round Table Conference. After their return from England in 1931, Kusum expressed her desire to take active participation in Gandhian movement and at the same time she didn't want to leave Vishal. In due course Amit was born and she couldn't take part in further Gandhian activities, but she wanted to serve the nation so when Gandhiji asked for the piece of land at Delhi to set up an exhibition of Swadeshi, Khaddar, leather goods, woodwork and brass and copper wares, she readily accepted the proposal. Being a religious devotee Vishal Chand told Kusum that he wanted to visit Gompah Budhha monastery for his purification. Kusum responded the same though differently as she wanted to rejoin Gandhiji. After a month later Kusum left Lambini and on last May she reached Sevagram where he found herself neglected as even Gandhi did not noticed her state of dejection. She had a great faith in God so in distress she only said, 'God!' When the meeting began there were the congress leaders like Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel, Sarojini Naidu, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, Rajgopalachari, Kriplani and Vijyalakshmi Pandit with whom Kusum met earlier. When Kusum saw Pandit Nehru, setting with broken heart due to his wife's death she realised:

'What place did personal sorrow have at such a momentous occasion? Jawahar Lal Nehru had some years ago lost his wife, Kamla, who had died in a Sanatorium in Switzerland.

His daughter Indira too was away from him, studying in England. There sat he with perhaps the saddest face Kusum had ever seen, yet showing no sorrow but only splendour. If these man and women could contain and hold themselves in the historicity of the movement, why couldn't she?"<sup>5</sup>

And right after that she came out of his distressed mood and took interest in the discussion of the meeting when Muzaffar Ahmad, the representative of Muhammad Ali Jinnah talked about the formation of Muslim League and its demand of the evolution of Pakistan as a security to Muslims. She was shocked how the people of different communities, living together since the time immemorial can live separately:

For Kusum, this was such a queer development; she had never considered the political future of India in that light. The Muslims and Hindus had always live together and would continue to do so when the British left."<sup>6</sup> P493

In Azadi the Deputy Commissioner has the similar views that it is very difficult to separate Hindus from Muslims as:

How do you cut a country in two, where at every level the communities were so deeply mixed? There was a Muslim in every corner of India where there was a Hindu....There were Hindus and Muslims at every level of that machinery!<sup>7</sup> [P.72]<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi found the spiritual renewal of thoughts in her. He thought besides her personal tragedies she might do something to handle the present chaos. Keeping in mind all this he asked Kusum that she should offer an individual Satyagrah but Kusum didn't go with his plan rather she went Wardha for gherao. Wardha was a small town where many officers resided to observe the activities of Gandhiji and the other revolutionaries. Kusum 'sat in a gherao, a sit in, outside the house of acting Superintendent of Police'. She sat in the varandah and never let anybody go inside or outside of the bungalow. Influenced by Kusum's valour some other women of ashram came along with her and besieged the Superintendent of Police completely and thus made him handicapped in his own bungalow as he couldn't receive or sent any information about Gandhi's activities. To cope with the problem the British government sent another Police officer to Wardha from Nagpur who was besieged at the Wardha Railway Station. Kusum's new kind of Satyagrah worked so effectively that the British Government could not rescue the officers easily because the congress volunteers came forward and made the lathi charge ineffective.

Gandhi, being the popular leader influenced Indians as well as the people of other countries too. Carol Schnicke, an Australian wanted to meet Gandhi before going back to Australia and she also wanted to see his devotee Kusum 'to speak about Raja Vishal Chand's death.' Being a woman her personality was badly affected by the sense of widowhood and she began to live in a rented house in Banaras to pay homage to her dead husbands by offering some religious practises. Banaras, One of the sacred cities of India added new

dimensions to her life as she began to live there at Sawera Kunj on Dashashwamedh Ghat as a hermitess. As a woman of diversified characteristics she cannot remain inactive rather she started a Khaddar Bhandar with the help of some other women of Sawera Kunj. When Matthew Craig came to her with an offer of donation for the resident of Saveru Kunj, she at once guessed his plan that he with Kenneth Ashby came to arrest the young revolutionaries but she gently told them that the those boys came to her only for motherly blessings. When her son Amit involved in revolutionary activities in Mirama, she felt proud as they were fighting for the same cause. On her return to her son, she kept her promise to take her son to the pilgrimage of Gompah.

Abha's diary described Kusum's readiness to help the needy. She narrated that Kusum found an infant girl at the gate of Sawera Kunj, she strongly wished to adopt the child legally as 'Sawera Kunj is a house of orphans only; so many neglected women are sheltered here.'<sup>8</sup> The thrilling and pathetic scene of Kusum's struggling against the vultures at Hauz Khas surpassed the heroism of any other character even the multifaceted personality of Gandhi that presented her as the heroine of Nahal's Gandhi Quartet. The vultures in the scene symbolizes the cruel practices of the Britishers over the Indians and Kusum's courageous stand against vultures symbolizes the Gandhian traits as when Kusum became conscious she spoke out; 'Bapu's way is the only way. Otherwise the vultures will eat us all. They will leave no one alive here.'<sup>9</sup>

Chaman Nahal presented Kusum Rani as a bearer of Gandhian heroism to convey the message that besides the hardships and worries one should not leave the path of truth and non violence. Iyenger says; 'The Quartet is Gandhi's story, India's story; it is also Kusum's story.'<sup>10</sup> as the historical narratives of the Quarter revolve around Gandhiji and the fictional thread is woven by Kusum.

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