

The Pathological Problematics of Communal Discord in Azadi

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Independence of India, in its wake, brought about massive shifts and shuffles in the socio-economic, political and cultural structures. A deluge of intellectual and socio-political activities began to foment and galvanize people of various coteries and classes for a complete social pandemonium and mayhem. Many established ideological beliefs and practices, values and vogues got discarded and abandoned. There lurked an inherent fetish fever and disillusionment among the masses who witnessed the birth of new India amidst the massacre and bloodshed of millions of innocent people. The partition of the Indian sub continent in 1947 not only sundered the body politic of this great nation but also left a festering wound on the Indian psyche. This is reflected in the tendency of the Indian English novelists to return to this theme time and again as is evident from Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) and Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964). Mehr Nigar Masroor's *Shadows of Time* (1987) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-candy-Man* (1988) are the two Pakistani English novels on Partition written on the other side of the Redcliff line.

But, it is left to Chaman Nahal to recapture the ominous reverberations of Partition, as his second novel, *Azadi* (1975), is not only his magnum opus, but also the most successful and enduring account of this traumatic national experience in which the personal and national perspectives merge beyond recognition. As such *Azadi* "transcends the limitations of the period piece and achieves universality because of its essential human centrality and the novelist's affirmation of life."

This paper attempts to discover the artistic sublimity of this novel in the deeper narrative structure of the changing pattern of communal relations that binds and goads the various episodes of this novel towards the artist's ultimate personal vision concerning that period. *Azadi* is the only novel on partition that adequately traces the progressive deterioration of communal relations between the Hindus and Sikhs on the one hand and the Muslims on the other to the low point of the catastrophe of partition and the gradual reassertion of communal sanity in the aftermath of partition thereby lending it the semblance of an expanded metaphor of the changing pattern of communal relations before, during and after Partition.

Appropriately enough the novel has been conceived in three parts: 'The Lull', 'The Storm' and 'The Aftermath'. While the first pattern of communal relations relating to the pre-partition period, marked by

Lull, has been covered in the first part bearing the same appellation, the second pattern of communal discord relating to the partition has been covered in the second part, and the ultimate pattern of rapprochement relating to the post partition period has been covered in the last part of the novel. The novel portrays the pre-partition pattern of communal relations between the two major communities of India by showing the amity that exists between the two because of having subsumed their religious differences to the commonalities of social life. Before the partition, the city Sialkot is a picture of peace, amity and co-operation among the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs - all being the children of the same soil. When Lala Kanshi Ram's only son, Arun, goes to the water tap near the shop of the Muslim hooka-manufacturer, Abdul Ghani, there is no question of the 'Hindu Water' or 'muslim water' at that time in Sialkot. All types of people-truck drivers, sweepers, water sprinklers, housewives, and assistants of the storeowners-go to the same water tap. Arun goes to the tap just 'to watch uncle Ghani ply his wizardry with the bamboo stems and the gold threads' and has not Ghani always greeted Arun with, 'Ohai, Arun de puter, how are you?' (p.47). And when Abdul Ghani needs a small loan, he goes to Lala Kanshi Ram, 'Lala Kanshi Ram, can you lend me two rupees for the night?' 'Sure I can!' (p.47) So there is amity between them and the fact that Ghani is a Muslim and Lala Kanshi Ram, a high caste Hindu never enter their heads. If they worship different gods, it is in the privacy of their homes, except when Ghani joins the Tazia marchers at the time of Muharram once a year beating his breast in public. But then, Lala Kanshi Ram also joins other Hindus of the bazaar in throwing colour on them during Holi. The very fact that Ramlila ground is adjacent to the old Christian Cemetery is indicative of the composite culture of the town. Moreover, this Ramlila ground itself has witnessed Hindu-Muslim amity prior to the announcement of Partition. Every year, huge effigies of Ravana and his associates were burnt in Dussehra 'was a Hindu festival, but the effigies were made by the Muslim workmen; the crackers and the fireworks, too, were supplied by the Muslims.' So they were not Muslims or Hindus, they were Punjabis.

The duality of the pattern of lull between the two communities is evident even from the close friendship of Lala Kanshi Ram and Chaudhri Barkat Ali, a Muslim sports factory owner in Sialkot. They owe their friendship, it seems, partly to their hailing from the same native village, Sambrial, and partly to their sharing the political views of the Congress. It is as if their friendship were rooted in the soil and watered by

their shared political perceptions. However, despite these close ties between them, their separate religious identities exist. It is interesting to note here that they send their sons to different schools. Arun goes to the Arya Samaj school and Munir to the Islamia school. Appropriately enough Lala Kanshi Ram and Chaudhri Barkat Ali, despite their vows of friendship represent two distinct cultures both in their ideologies and their daily routine.

In this respect, we find in *Azadi* a different pattern of Hindu-Muslim relations in the pre-partition period from that in the novels like *Train to Pakistan* and *Twice Born Twice Dead* whereas *Azadi* projects a discernible distance between the Hindus and the Muslims even during the period of communal amity, the two novels depict complete harmony between the Sikhs and the Muslims because of the rural settings of those novels.

With the announcement of partition, the difference lurking underneath the fragile pattern of communal amity widens to an extent that the relations between the two communities grow suspicious and acrimonious, presenting thereby the second pattern of communal relations characterized by communal disharmony.

The announcement of Partition has hurt even Arun and Munir in ways they could not understand. There is an inexplicable tension between them; the old feeling of amicability and togetherness is gone. Their reactions to the questions of Bill Davidson concerning communal relations between the Hindus and the Muslims after the Partition are indicative of their differences of perception: 'Could the Hindus live in Pakistan?' Arun has asked. Davidson replied that it depended on how Pakistan treats the Hindus. 'and also on how the new India treats the Muslims, said Munir prompted by a spontaneous desire to come out in defence of Islam'. (p.118)

It is, therefore, not at all difficult to see how the pattern of Lull degenerates into the pattern of communal discord and bloodshed. The Hindus and Sikhs in trains are singled out and mercilessly slaughtered. No tragedy in an isolated one. It hurts each one of them, since the range and dimension of the blow is applicable to them all. But similar is the tragedy of Muslims in India; they, too, fall victims to communal violence. The Muslims, who run away from India and settle in Sialkot look unbelievably miserable.

In this sickening pattern of communal discord even the pure and profound Arun Nur love relationship ceases to be a private, personal affair but 'a Hindu boy carrying on with a Muslim girl', (p.105) and even Munir who never objected to this relationship in the past, does not 'think this can go on' (p.105) because 'the Muslim boys will lynch you if they see you with

her.' (p.105) Even Nur labels Arun a Hindu- after all a Hindu too timid! (p.91).

With the influx, specially from East Punjab, U.P. and Bihar, of the Muslim refugees crying hoarsely and narrating their tales of woe and destruction at the hands of the Sikhs and Hindus on the other side of the border, communal tension mounts up in Sialkot and incidents and instances which were at first only sporadic acts of murder, looting and arson soon explode into massive and organized violence by Muslims. A sizeable majority of the Hindu families of Sialkot, residing in Bibi Amaravati's two houses on the Fort Street shift for safety to the newly set up refugee camp under Lala Kanshi Ram's leadership. It is here that they receive the shocking news of the death of Kanshi Ram's daughter, Madhu Bala and her husband at the hands of communalists in a train on their way from Wazirabad to Sialkot.

The description of communal frenzy which engulfs thousands of families is naked tangible proof of the inhuman acts committed which would certainly move any sane and sensible man with shame and sorrow: The dead had been removed from the train and dumped there without sentiment or concern. It so happened that many of them had their arms around each other or they were holding each other with their legs. And in the disintegration the fire brought to them, there was a constant movement in the heaps. (p.176) The communal venom is evident in Ghani's hatred towards his Hindu neighbor's dead daughter Madhu, who has been killed in a train massacre: I put her and her husband into the fire with my own hands, and they are on their way to dozakh, to hell -where I hope they rot for ever' (p.177)

When they are stationed in the refugee camp in Sialkot, Niranjana Singh is asked by everyone to shave off his beard so that they can reach Amritsar by train avoiding recognition in order to save trouble for his wife, Isher Kaur, who is in an advanced stage of pregnancy. But to him, as to every true Sikh, hair on the head and the beard 'was a kind of badge of courage'. He cannot bear to lose this. Thrust to the precipice, he set fire to himself, crying, 'I belong to Waheguru....Life I'll gladly lose, my Sikh dharma I won't.' (p.257) Unlike Jugga in *Train to Pakistan*, Niranjana Singh chooses the path of self-immolation rather than that of the active defender of communal amity. This is anachronistic with the teachings of the Sikh faith and its tradition. The novelist, therefore, seems to have an erroneous view of Sikh traditions.

Uprooted from home and feeling crushed by the swirl of events, they now want to leave for India at the earliest available opportunity. The foot convoy including Lala Kanshi Ram, his wife Prabha Rani, their son, Arun, Padmini, a charwoman, and her daughter Chandani, Bibi Amaravati, her son, Suraj Prakash and

his wife, Sunanda, Sardar Teja Singh and his daughter, Isher kaur and thousands and thousands of others, leave Sialkot for Dera Baba Nanak. The caravan passes through a route littered with dismembered human limbs and skeletons, battered steel trunks and discarded clothes. When this convoy of refugees reaches Narrowal, it is attacked by Muslim marauders. The scene of slaughter is, indeed, a blood-curdling one. The road is littered with dead bodies and articles. Appropriately enough, D.R. Sharma gives full credit to Nahal for delineating this wholesale massacre of 'humanity'. He opines: Describing the world of fugitives in all its depth and magnitude, Nahal portrays the scenes of murders and rapes with the candor of a novelist.

As usual, the young girls are carried away by the mobs. Though Sunanda is raped still she is saved by Arun. But Chandani is abducted. Nahal paints this picture thus: Most of the dead lay fully dressed. Only a few women lay with their breasts exposed with a dead child next to the breast. Most of the children lay with their faces downward. The men lay on their backs or on their sides, their mouths open... (p.282). The women who are kidnapped are later paraded naked through the town. The Muslims convert some of them to Islam and marry them. But the fate of others is horrifying. Nahal remarks: There were subjected to mass rape at times in public places and in the presence of large gatherings. The rape was followed by other atrocities, chopping of the breasts and even death. Many of the pregnant women had their wombs torn open. The survivors were retained for repeated rapes and humiliations, until they were parceled out to decrepit wrecks- the aged or the left-overs who could not find a wife or those Muslims who wanted an additional wife. In the mean time, more women were abducted and the cycle was repeated all over again. (pp.289-90)

The novelist brings out the nauseating vulgarity of the situation thus: 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, who must have been over sixty. They were all stark naked. Their heads were completely shaven; so were their public regions. (p.292)

It is a shameful procession of insensitivity and obscenity. But when the shouts of 'Rape them', 'put it inside of them', 'The Kafir women', are coming from the bazaar, a Muslim hakim- doctor practicing an indigenous system of medicine- covers his face with his hands rocking a little and saying 'Allah', 'Allah'. And then he kneels on his knees, raises his arms and spreads his hands before him, as while saying namaz. There is a look of infinite pain on his face. And moving his outstretched hands, like begging alms he murmurs, 'Rabbul-Alamin, forgive these cruel men. And oh, my

Allah, oh rabbah, protect these women!' (pp.294-950). So with a more frivolous and noisy shout, with a lot of jeering and whistling, Nahal juxtaposes a figure of grace and redemption- a bearded Muslim hakim weeping for the Hindu women. Once again after the brutal attack on the convoy at Narrowal, the refugees are scared. They fear another attacks from a Muslim village, Jassar. But the Muslims in Jassar only stand and stare. Instead of attacking the convoy, some of the inhabitants of Jassar run inside their homes and bring water for the thirsty, some wave and say, 'Khuda Hafiz.' On crossing the border to India, Kanshi Ram sees a similar slaughter of the Muslims. The Muslims in Pakistan attacked the foot convoys, looted and burnt the Hindu women and massacred the people in trains.

But, the Hindus and Sikhs in India are shown equally cruel in vengeance and violence. They, too, parade the Muslim women through the market and hurl all kinds of humiliations at them. The Hindus in India are as guilty as the Muslims in Pakistan. This fact is very well stressed by Kanshi Ram when he says: We are all guilty... Each of those girls in that procession at Amritsar was someone's Madhu, and there must have been many amongst the dead you saw at Ambala.' (p.335)

The poignant and serious recognition of the deeper truths of life comes to him as he is passing through Kurukshetra. In fact, it has been a veritable war, a Kurukshetra for all- the Hindus as well as the Muslims. But what has the battle resulted in? Hatred, animosity, revenge, destruction and scant regard for human values on either side. As at the time of Mahabharata battle here also comes the moment of spiritual awakening, a moment of awareness of utter futility and meaninglessness of all that had happened. It is the moment of pain born of the realization of all pervasive sin. Kanshi Ram remarks: 'I have ceased to hate.' (p.334)

Lala Kanshi Ram's emancipation from the thralldom of communal discord helps the shift in the patterns of communal relations from communal discord to rapprochement. Having realized the futility of subjective hatred, Lala Kanshi Ram transcends his personal agonies and adopts a detached and objective approach to the pattern of communal discord during partition. This helps him establish oneness in spirit with the Muslims, who like him, also have been victims of partition. D.R. Sharma has rightly observed: Although a victim of the communal fury, Lala Kanshi Ram develops an insight into the world of violence and tells his wife at the end that he has ceased to hate. The utterance does not startle the reader, for it grows out of the protagonist's heroic endurance of the ordeal and his gradual awareness of the larger reality.

The novel reinforces the emerging pattern of rapprochement and resurrection in the birth of a child to Ishas Kaur who has lost her husband in the turmoil of

partition and in accentuating the continuity of life in the ceaseless running of the sewing machine by Sunanda, who, too, has tided over the wounds of Partition.

The preceding analysis, hopefully, reveals that Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* depicts on an epic scale the changing patterns of communal relations from a stage of lull through the purgatory of communal discord to the visionary state of rapprochement with a clinical gaze and authenticity of a detached observer. Like any great writer of humanity at large Nahal compassionately deplores the irreparable rift and scathing resentment, gradually festering up into a malignant attitude and a self-destructive way of life but staunchly reaffirms the possibilities and faith in an evolving society with broader understanding and greater tolerance which shall redefine the emerging identity of new and independent India.

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