

IMAGE OF INDIAN NATIONAL LEADERS IN CHAMAN NAHAL'S
'THE GANDHI QUARTET'

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ABSTRACT

This article modestly attempts to project the image of the Indian national leaders as depicted by Chman Nahal, modern Indian English novelist, in his significant work **The Gandhi Quartet**, a landmark in the annals of Indian English fiction and historical work. His fictional work mainly deals with India's freedom movement and its socio-political consequences. On the whole, it appears that he looks towards the history of Indian freedom movement with liberal attitude which reflected through some his ideas about the Indians and British. The fictional characters created by him intermingle with the real historical figures like Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Bose and Jinnah. In general, Nahal is historically objective. He is not the Indian national leader. Though he appears to revere Gandhiji, it does not prevent him from showing his weaknesses. He has also shown the failure of leaders at the time of partition including Gandhi. He also tries to expose the conspiracy of the Indian politicians and their intentions behind the partition.

Keywords: *Nahal, Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, Jinnah, novel.*

Introduction:

Chaman Nahal, a modern Indian English novelist and winner of Sahitya Akademi Award for *Azadi*. His fictional work mainly deals with India's freedom movement and its socio-political consequences. On the whole, it appears that he looks towards the history of Indian freedom movement with liberal attitude which reflected through some his ideas about the Indians and British. *The Gandhi Quartet* is a landmark in the annals of Indian English fiction and historical work which consists of the novels like *The Crown and the Lioncloth*, *The Salt of Life*, *The Triumph of the Tricolour*, and *Azadi*. The novels in the Quartet have

appeared in India in response to the massive political movement and events such as Civil Disobedience movement, Non-cooperation, Dandi yatra, Quit India and Partition of the country. The historical period he is dealing with is the past which he himself has lived and experienced. The fictional characters created by him intermingle with the real historical figures like Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Bose and Jinnah. This article modestly attempts to project the image of Indian national leaders as depicted by Nahal in *The Gandhi Quartet*.

The Crown and Lioncloth, the first volume of the Quartet series, describes the historical events of freedom struggle from 1915 to 1922, keeping Gandhi in the centre. The novel begins with a description of Gandhi returning from South Africa. Using the mode of flashback, the major events associated with Gandhi's social and political work in South Africa. It suggests confrontation between the mighty empire and Lioncloth-clad Indian national leader, Gandhi, who was the sole actor on the field of operations. The author sees Gandhi as symbol of moral and spiritual strength triumphing over physical odds. "The title is symbolical suggestive of the theme –battle between two unequal forces-the Crown and the Lioncloth; power of rulers verses the power of the meek subjugated masses, 'Mighty British Empire' the Crown verses the newly awakened India under the leadership of Gandhi, the flimsy Lioncloth" (Sharma,48).

Chaman Nahal, in this novel, presents Gandhi (who has yet to become Mahatma), emerging as leader, shaping his policy, perfecting his methods of non-violence and satyagraha. He becomes Mahatma through his practice of self-denial in his own way of life, and he teaches the use of this instrument of self-denial to the masses to fight any kind of tyrant. Gandhi becomes Mahatma by strictly obeying all his vows and never forgiving himself any lapses. Nahal has shown this through Gandhi's life in the Ashram. Gandhi has realized, from his own experiences in South Africa, that moral right is the only answer to the moral wrong. He decides to try this in India. We can see that Nahal's Gandhi in this novel and following novels also, is not a static character. He is all experimenting and learning from the events and situations. He starts with faith in British character and their friendship. But after the incident of Jallianwala Bagh, he feels that his faith has been shaken. It is after this event that Gandhi invented the phrase 'non-co-operatiopn' at one of his prayer meetings. He did not anymore trust the British sense of justice.

The secular image of Gandhi stands out in this novel when he reacts to the talk of Muslim's emigrating from India and settling in Arabia or some other Muslim country in the following manner in his speech in the prayer meeting.

A Hindu may perhaps be happy to get rid of the Muslims. But he would be stupid Hindu, an ignorant Hindu. For what would India be without the Muslims! Talk not to me of the atrocities they committed upon the Hindus and the Sikhs. Given the chance, the Hindus would have committed as many atrocities upon them. Talk to me instead of the beauty they have brought to India, talk to me of their architecture, of the roads they laid, of the inns they built, of the wells they dug, of the gardens they planted. And talk to me of the amalgamation of the cultures which the best of the Muslim kings aimed at- in their own lives and in the life of the community. If they married Hindu women, they married them as equals and didn't promote a race of half-breeds. And the same Muslim heads that wouldn't bow or bend before a Hindu adversary on the battlefield prostrated themselves before Hindu art, before Hindu music, before Hindu dance. Go and listen to a Muslim musician, if you doubt me. In all probability he will be singing of Radha and Krishna. If Hindu art and dance survived in fact today, it was because of the Muslim patronage of the art. No, I would say if Hinduism survived today, it was because of the challenge the Muslims threw to it as a religion. They made many converts, but not too many; they were in a minority even after centuries of rule. They made the Hindus sit back and think and put their house in order. Bereft of Muslims, India would be like a face with an eye missing. No, what touched the Muslims should touch the Hindus (CL, 140-141).

This speech reflects nothing but Gandhi's comprehensive soul and straightforwardness. It also shows that there is no feeling of racial discrimination in the mind of the Gandhi. He gives equal status to Hindu as well as Muslims here.

The Salt of Life, being second novel in *The Gandhi Quartet*, deals with the second phase of the freedom movement, from 1930 to 1941. Actually this novel deals with some historical incidents such as Gandhi's life in the Ashram, his mass movement against the British, role of Subhas Bose and his attitude to Gandhian movement, and Jinnah's demand for Pakistan. Within this historical reference, Nahal creates the image of Gandhi in this novel. Such image is projected through the eyes of Indian as well as British characters. Ashramities

are deeply reverential about Gandhiji. He is a father figure for them. Kusum, the wife of Raja Vishal Chand, respects Gandhi as a father. When Raja Vishal Chand tells her that the Government wants him to arrest Gandhi when he comes to Lambini, she becomes nervous: “Gandhi had been like a father to her for many years. He would be their honoured guest in Lambini. Would they stab a father and a guest in the back?” (SL, 460). There are many foreigners who believe Gandhi to have spiritual powers. An American young man seeks moral support of Gandhi in his Satyagraha. Nahal takes help of fiction and history both in presenting Gandhian image. For e.g., when the news of Gandhi’s arrest reaches the international capitals, there are demonstrations all over. Romain Rolland, the Swiss who had written a brief biography of Gandhi, went on a day’s fast. *The Time magazine* in New York declares Gandhi as man of the year and carries his picture on the front cover. It seems that Gandhi is not only fighting for the common people of India; he is fighting for the dignity of the common man everywhere.

In *The Triumph of the Tricolour*, the third novel of *The Gandhi Quartet*, Nahal deals with the third phase of India’s freedom movement, the 1942 Quit India period. Gandhi is the central figure even here, though the violent revolutionaries now play as significant a role in the challenge to the British rule. The novel deals with Kusum’s two sons, Vikram and Amit who adopt different postures. Vikram, being the product of the Gandhi Ashram where he has lived from the age of five, follows the Gandhian path. Amit, Kusum’s son by Raja Vishal Chand, is more inclined towards the violent revolutionaries. Historical circumstances force the British to announce an interim Indian government in 1946 before India’s full freedom. While most of the Congress leaders accept office in that government, Vikram declines the honour. Here Vikram, a fictional character, represents Gandhi in his unselfish, virtuous and honest leadership, because though the Government was formed, Gandhi did not share the power. Nahal shows how Gandhi was different from others in these words:

Gandhi had opted to stay at Bhangi Colony - the Sweepers Colony—at Delhi as a measure of protest. By staying with these untouchables, may be he could shame his people into a mood of reconciliation. He was extending himself to the limits. But Nehru and the senior Congress leaders had already shifted into government bungalows in New Delhi in preparation of the new role they would soon be playing. They were already moving around in official cars. They were already being provided with official security (TT, 460).

These words indirectly criticize Nehru and other Congress leaders. They were as if in a hurry to grab power. Kusum's two sons have two different images of Gandhiji. Vikram says, "*Bapu has the most intelligent eyes, ever shining and burning with a glow. In the worst of days, in the worst of tragedies, those eyes didn't lose their blaze.*" (TT, 434). On the other hand, Amit, who was brought up in Lambini, away from his mother, considered Gandhi's non-violence as humbug. Amit represents the younger revolutionaries disillusioned by the ways of Gandhi. In 1945, with the defeat of the Japanese, Subhas Chandra Bose on the run, Gandhi quiet at Sevagram, and everywhere in India the Indians rising against the British in violent manner, there was no one for them to turn to. Amit takes part in abducting British officers alongwith his friend Kapil and the tribal leader Padamrai Kranti. Amit talks about Gandhi in a very irreverential manner. Attitudes to Gandhiji change from person to person. Here, Nahal brings out all these aspects of Gandhian image. And yet he is shown to be constant in his principles and actions.

Azadi, the last novel of *The Gandhi Quartet* "highlights the psychological consequences of the partition." It is centred round the Hindu family of Lala Kanshi Ram, a grain merchant in the city of Sialkot. It is also deals with "*the political, social, economic, religious, psychological and cultural implications of 'Azadi' which India achieved in 1947.*" (Goyal,124). In this novel, Nahal has projected the image of Gandhi as a contrast to the other national leaders. Through Lala Kanshi Ram, Nahal voices the confidence and faith of a common man in Gandhi. Kanshi Ram believes that Gandhi will never let partition happen. He says:

The Congress had a promise to keep with the people. For the last thirty years, since that wizard Gandhi came on the scene, it had taken the stand that India was a single nation, not two. And Gandhi was not only a politician, he was a saint. He had his inner voice to satisfy, too. Would that nagging voice of his let him accept the slaughter of so many? That's what it would mean, if Pakistan did come into existence. And Gandhi was shrewd-surely he saw it all. He wouldn't give in to such butchery. If nothing else worked, his fasts unto death always did (Azadi,42).

In the meeting of the merchants in Lala Kanshi Ram's store, the merchants, both Hindu and Muslim, express their faith in Gandhi. Kanshi Ram says, "*Mahatmaji is going to save us*" while Lala Shamsel Bahadur says, "*Bapu has a shakti an inner power, which no one else can dream of.*" (Azadi, 44).

Chaman Nahal has created the character like Lala Kanshi Ram in the image of Gandhi. When the partition is announced, Lala does not go to India soon after the declaration of the partition. He continues to live in Sialkot only because he has a deep attachment with the 'land of the five five rivers'. Like a real Congress leader, he believes in living with the Muslim looking upon them as brothers. The young generation of Sikhs and Hindus, on the contrary, is ready to pay the Muslims in the same coin, but the Lala, like the Mahatma, tries to maintain peace through non-violence. He takes Gandhi's death very deeply to his heart. Like Gandhi, he endures several personal losses very bravely. In short, Lala Kanshi Ram is Gandhi incarnate and goes through identical ordeals and sufferings. As Rama Jha says, "*He is deliberately modelled as a Gandhian character to register Gandhi's death as a personal loss.*" (IL,116). Through a number of events and situations of the life in the Ashram, Nahal has projected Gandhiji's single mindedness, honesty, sincerity, his transparent thinking, his ability to persuade people, inspire confidence in them, and his open-mindedness. At the same time could be very rigid, very autocratic and demanding.

Nahal has also presented the image of Gandhi through the revolutionaries like Rakesh Kumar and Rai Bahadur Hemant Kumar. They did not think much of Gandhi's principle of non-violence and his method of Satyagraha. Hemant Kumar, for example, says, "*Gandhi was a fool who was not taking the people forward but backward. What would going to jail achieve—or fasting?*" (CL,63).

In *The Triumph of the Tricolour*, Joseph Daniel, a revolutionary is highly critical of Gandhi. He describes Gandhi and expresses his anger about him in the following manner:

The Mahatma was only a white-collar revolutionary if you ask me. The British were ever bending over backwards to satisfy his whims -- special living quarters, special food, special interviews with his family. He, Joseph Daniel, had lost all contact with family. He knew his father had apple orchards in Kulu. But he had not visited Kulu in twenty-five years nor eaten an apple – out of sheer spite. Did the Mahatma lose touch with his family? Did the Mahatma change addresses to save himself from to police? Did the Mahatma go without food—there being nothing to eat? He was living in luxury and continuing with this farce of a non-violent struggle. Non-violent, my foot (TT,129).

But all revolutionaries were not of the same opinion. Bhagat Singh, for instance, expressed great regard for Gandhiji, when Nehru went to see him in a prison in Goa. The British characters, especially the military officers like Brigadier- General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer, always suspected Gandhi's moves. Dyer describes Gandhi as the arch villain.

Nahal's Gandhi goes through introspective bouts now and then. He is aware of his own limitations and weaknesses. He reflects on his own strategies and his ability to carry them out. On his way to Dandi, for Salt-Satyagraha, he has one of his introspective moments in which he says:

I have no power to throw the British out of India either, I can only try, I can only pitch my faith against theirs, put myself and them on the scales of justice, in divine justice at least, and we will throw the British out and tip the scales in our favour if all of you were to lend me a small hand, you know I'm an old man, I cannot even walk without stick, without a staff, I just hate the idea of it, when a man cannot walk on his own, he has no right to walk at all, his journeys are over, he better take the road to the Himalayas, what am I doing on this road to Dandi (SL,211).

Like Gandhi, the images of other national leaders like Pandit Nehru, Subhas Bose, M. A. Jinnah and others are presented through the fictional Hindu, Sikhs, Muslims and the British characters by Nahal in *The Gandhi Quartet*. In *The Salt of Life*, Nahal has sharply brought out the difference between Nehru and Sardar Patel in the following words:

For Nehru, living was a matter of delicacy, of sophistry, something he had inherited from Motilal. Vallabhbhai, though a lawyer by training like Nehru, had more the mind of a peasant: rough and instantaneous. The masterly way Vallabhbhai had handled the Satyagraha in Gujarat had made Gandhi confer on him the sobriquet of Sardar, a leader. Jawaharlal's handling of the same in the U.P was not effective. Yet in personal charisma Jawahar was far ahead of the Sardar: he drew immense crowds.....The Sardar was patently irritated by this (SL,353-354).

In *Azadi*, Pandit Nehru comes in for severe criticism when there is fear of Partition. He is blamed and held responsible for the partition. This sentiment is expressed through Lala Kanshi Ram. He reacts furiously to Nehru's role in the partition politics. In this respect he says:

What stupid thing was he talking about? Was he really Nehru? The drawl was the same, the emotion in the words was the same, the disjointed, queer Hindu syntax was his alone, but what had happened to his akal, his mind? Have partition if there is no other way, have it that way- we're willing to make sacrifices. But what nonsense was this of no panic, no violence, full protection from the government, peace the main object! Had he gone mad? Didn't he know his people? Didn't he know the Muslims? And why the partition in the first place? What of your promise to us, you Pandit Nehru? (Azadi,56-57).

Lala Kanshi Ram is highly critical of the congress leaders like Nehru and Jinnah. For him, Nehru and Jinnah both were villains. He expressed this view in the following manner:

What the leaders of India were offering the people of the Punjab was an enormous bulff. They had neither the power nor the intention of maintaining the minorities in their homes; they had not the power of saving their lives. They should have devised means of mass migration of begin with, before rushing to partition. Now they should at least keep their mouths shut and not mislead the poor, credulous people. Jinnah and Nehru were villains enough (Azadi, 177-78).

Lala Kanshi Ram also wants to “take out his sword and hack Nehru to pieces” (Azadi, 57). Here must remember that these expressions were the result of the common man's anger, frustration and anxiety rather than the true image of the leader in general.

Subhas Chandra Bose, an important Indian nation leader, was much more popular with the common people, specially in the period of the World War II, than other Indian national leaders. Even the revolutionaries like Joseph Danial admired and worshiped Bose. He says, “If Subhas Bose can establish a foothold there, we will at least have a leader to look up to. No we have no one.....Bose can fill that void” (TT, 139-140). Nahal has captured the general sentiment about Subhas Bose, while describing the phenomenal famine in Bengal in 1943. The attention of the whole of India was diverted to Bengal. And at the same time Subhas Bose was at the door-step of India, with his Indian National Army. Subhas Bose was perceived there as a great hero. Even Gandhiji had accepted Bose as the great son of India in the changed atmosphere of 1942.

Barrister M.A. Jinnah is one more important pre-independence Indian leader. Like Nehru, Jinnah also comes in for sever criticism when there is fear of partition. Jinnah appears first in the second volume *The Salt of Life*. But the portrayal of Jinnah mostly found in the third volume of the Quartet-viz *The Triumph of the Tricolour*. The rationale behind his demand for Pakistan is reported by Nahal through Muzaffar Ahmed, in the following words.

The two-year Congress rule in many of the provinces, from 1937-1939, had convinced the Muslims of the totalitarian intent of the Hindus. The Congress rituals were all essentially Hindu rituals and the Muslim consciousness had been asphyxiated in the provinces ruled by the Congress. The Act of 1935 was a blessing in disguise for the Muslims. It had shown them how the Congress would operate in a free India. Hence the Muslims League's demand for Pakistan a separate sovereign state for the Muslims. At Lahore in 1940, and now in Madras, the League had passed clear resolutions to this effect, and under the able leadership of Qaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah they would Insha-Allah see the Muslims of India got justice at the hands of British (SL,488).

The very word 'able' used in the case of Jinnah clearly shows the Muslim attitude towards him. We can see how Jinnah distrusted Congress party and Congress men. His demand for the separate state was based on this distrust.

Arun Kumar, the son of Lala Kanshi Ram, voices a common opinion in 'Azadi' that there was no need to separate the Muslims from Hindus. He also blames the leaders like Nehru and Jinnah who rush into Azadi hurriedly. He expressed his anger and annoyance in the following manner:

He knew the conspiracy of politicians behind the whole move. Jinnah and Liakat Ali Khan were coming into an estate; as was Nehru. Why else would they rush into Azadi at this pace-an azadi which would ruin the land and destroy its unity? One would have to go around with tweezers through all the villages to separate the Muslims from the Hindus (Azadi, 81).

Azadi is all about the partition and its aftermath. The Muslim leader, who shines through the pages of *Azadi* is Maulana Abul Kalam Azad opposed the stand taken by Muslim League and Jinnah. According to him, the glory of Islam would shine more in a free undivided India; and the Muslim should work for it. This nobleness is projected through the historical character, Maulana Azad himself in *The Salt of Life*. Nehru himself pointed out the argument behind separate state for Muslims was illogical. But Nahal is successful in showing how the national leaders were confused and half-hearted in their thinking. It was Gandhi's and it was a gross failure of the other leaders that they were completely oblivious to the common people's fear and anxiety. They could not visualize what would happen when partition is announced. Only common people like Kanshi Ram knew it. Thus, Nahal shows that how the Indian national leadership, whether Nehru or Jinnah, utterly failed.

It is quite obvious that in all novels of the Quartet the focus is more on Gandhi than any other national leader. Gandhi appears as a major character in Nahal's and deeply influences the life of the fictional characters by Nahal. As result the image of Gandhi is dynamic and many-sided. Nahal's the moral and spiritual aspects of Gandhian image and the movement of Gandhi have been brought out to a great extent. Gandhi emerges as a selfless, saintly figure, who was worried about the ununited India and who suffered for the partition. Nahal's Gandhi is very human figure, sometimes full of doubts, introspective, susceptible to human weakness and passion. He is lived as well as hated. The images of other Indian national leaders like Nehru, Jinnah, Subhas Bose and others in the novels of Nahal are faithful to the history of Indian freedom movement. They are appreciated or criticized by the common people's representatives Lala Kanshi Ram. Nahal also tries to expose the conspiracy of the Indian politicians and their intentions behind the partition. He not only holds the English responsible for the butchery, but he is equally critical of the Indian national leaders as well. As rightly pointed out by K.R.Srinivas Iyengar: "*The 'leaders' had sowed the wind of communal suspicion and partition was the result, like a whirlwind, the mad act of the partition was uprooting masses of humanity, mangling them and throwing them across the border heap after heap*" (IWE, 498). In general, Nahal is historically objective. He is not the Indian national leader. Though he appears to revere Gandhiji, it does not prevent him from showing his weaknesses.

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