



## Partition trauma: Saga of pains in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*

Dr. Mousumi Chakraborty

Principal, Vasunddhara B.Ed. And D.El.Ed. College, Purulia, West Bengal, India

### Abstract

Partition, stands for the vivisection of the Indian Sub-continent into two different countries named India and Pakistan, in 1947. The partition of the Indian sub-continent is an event of such a great magnitude and significance that it had political, social, cultural, religious, economic and humanitarian repercussions not only on the sub-continent and its people but also on the equations that impact global politics. Partition may be seen as a severely destructive event in the history of twentieth century India. Contemporary culture, literature and history bear such a profound impact of partition that affected people and their families still struggle to outlive the traumatic memories and their aftermath. The partition of India apart from the vivisection of the sub-continent also created a kind of irremediable cataclysm for millions of people, the pictures of which are embossed in their memories in such a manner that they catalyze frequently apocalyptic events even today. *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal is a seminal work in Indian literature, offering a profound exploration of the Partition of India and its far-reaching effects on individual lives and communal dynamics. The novel presents a compelling narrative that captures the turbulence and tragedy of the period. This paper is an attempt to highlight the inexplicable sufferings of those refugees during the time of partition.

**Keywords:** Partition, trauma, communal lines, political freedom, refugee

### Introduction

The Partition of India happens to be one of the most significant events in the realm of Modern Indian History, and it has secured a unique place within the large body of South Asian Studies. Devastated by World War II and faced with a series of anti-colonial movements, the Raj finally left its most important 'Jewel in the Crown' in August 1947. Unable to solve the political deadlock between the two major parties of British India (chiefly the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League), the Empire decided to mark a deep scar on its territory along the communal lines before leaving India. The Indian Territory was thus carved into a 'Hindu' India and a 'Muslim' Pakistan along with a fateful communal line drawn by Cyril Radcliffe, "who had made the final decisions over where the specific boundary line would lie". This historic decision, in turn, gave birth to unprecedented sectarian violence and brutal forms of atrocities, large-scale human migration and destabilisation whose legacies can be seen even today. That is what Babasaheb had cautioned. This shame and agony of the Partition finds expression in many Indian novels. Taking an aerial view of the novels in English related to the Partition theme. Since the province of Punjab was the first to face and witness the holocaust and trauma of Partition, the writers of this region were naturally first to respond to the tragedy in various literary endeavors. Most of these novels, in their own way recreate the situation of the Partition and its aftermath. Trauma being a terrifying upshot of memory, especially those in the deepest realms of human psyche, literature written with reference to such memories becomes a horrid recollection of trauma. It is the pain and agony which reminds one of the distressing past and keeps on haunting occasionally an individual and sometimes an entire nation as it ranges from the public and historical to the private and memorial. This traumatic and perturbing memory of the tormented self-forces one to express one's own agony and anguish by rewriting one's own history. India as a nation, too, undergoes this pain and suffering

when the British declare the partition of the land into two parts - India and Pakistan. At the stroke of the midnight on 15 August 1947, India obtains its independence from the British rule; this moment of celebration is, however, marred by the horrendous event of partition.

The novel *Azadi* was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Federation of Indian Publisher Award in 1977, underscoring its significance in Indian literary and historical discourse. The novel remains a landmark work in Partition literature due to its profound and empathetic portrayal of one of the most defining moments in South Asian history. Through its richly developed characters and carefully crafted narrative structure, the novel encapsulates the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of communal violence and displacement. Nahal's *Azadi* is a moving and heart breaking story of the seven west Punjabi families, who were deeply affected by the partition. The novel is divided into three parts they are (1) Lull, (2) The storm, (3) The aftermath. In the second part there is heart-rending graphic description of riots and annihilation of Hindu families in Sialkot. By focusing on the personal experiences of figures like Lala Kanshi Ram, Arun, and Nur, the novel offers an intimate yet historically grounded exploration of Partition's enduring legacy. Nahal's balanced perspective challenges readers to reflect on the complexities of identity, the tragedy of lost unity, and the resilience required to rebuild in the aftermath of historical trauma.

### Major Thrust

*Azadi*, a novel by Chaman Nahal, is widely regarded as one of the most profound literary responses to the Partition of India. Published in 1975, the novel offers a deeply human perspective on the events surrounding the Partition, focusing on the lived experiences of ordinary people. The title itself, *Azadi*, meaning "freedom," is deeply ironic. While the Partition marked India and Pakistan's independence from British rule, it also resulted in immense suffering for those forced to migrate or witness their homes being torn apart by

religious violence. Nahal's novel explores the contradiction between political freedom and personal loss, capturing the complexities of this historical moment. The novel begins with the announcement of Partition and its immediate impact on the city of Sialkot, which had been home to Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs for centuries. The first riot took place in Sialkot on the Twenty-fourth of June. Many cities of the Punjab had been aflame for months; there were large scale killings and looting in Lahore, Gujarat, Gujranwala, Amritsar, Ambala, Jullundur, Rawalpindi, Multan, Ludhiana and Sargodha. (Nahal 108)

The novel *Azadi* covers the time period from the day of the announcement of the partition of Indian sub-continent to the post-partition time. The novel opens on June 3rd, 1947 when the Viceroy was to make an announcement of *Azadi* (Independence of Indian Sub-continent) and geographical partition of the subcontinent on communal basis. The writer uses third person narration technique to narrate imaginative historical story. He describes realistically the condition, fate, conflicts, and future of Hindu and Sikh families living in Sialkot (now in Pakistan) during those traumatic days of partition. Events in the novel *Azadi*, revolve around a Hindu family of Lala Kanshi Ram and their non-Muslim neighbours who paid a very high cost for the independence and partition. Bijay Kumar Das observes, Though Nahal concentrates on Lala's family, his mind like a computer multiplies the horror into numerable folds to get at the correct picture of holocaust. (Das 108)

Lala Kanshi Ram, the protagonist, is portrayed as a wholesale grain merchant in the city of Sialkot. (Nahal 13) He is prosperous, respected Hindu grain merchant in Sialkot, a city in Punjab that, before Partition, had a mixed population of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Kanshi Ram represents the stability and social prominence of the middle-class Hindu identity in a Muslim-majority region. He enjoys a relatively peaceful and successful life, confident in his place within a diverse but interconnected community. His livelihood and status are firmly rooted in the socio-economic fabric of pre-Partition Sialkot, where he is well-respected by both Hindus and Muslims. His sense of identity is closely tied to his home, his business, and the relationships he shares with his Muslim neighbours, reflecting the coexistence of different religious communities before communal tensions boiled over. Lala was deeply anguished when he was asked by an enquiring officer in Amritsar that what the purpose of going to Delhi was. Lala saw the accuracy of the British Raj in as small an act as the killing of a stray dog and realized that Indeed was no Raj like the Angrez Raj. (Nahal 112) Nationally he is an Indian at the beginning of the novel but later on he becomes Pakistani with the partition violence of 1947. He becomes refugee in his own home-country India, after the partition. Other characters are Prabha Rani (wife of Lala Kanshi Ram), Madhu Bala (their daughter), Arun (their son), Bibi Amar Vati (a landlady of Sialkot), Gangu Mull (her husband), Suraj Prakash (their son), Sunanda Bala (Suraj Prakash's wife), Sardar Jodha Singh (a dry-fruit merchant of Sialkot and another tenant of Bibi Amar Vati), Sardar Teja Singh (his son), Isher Kaur (Teja Singh's daughter), Niranjana Singh (Isher Kaur's husband), Padmini (a charwoman, also a tenant of Bibi Amar Vati), Chandani (her daughter), Chaudhri Barkat Ali (a sports-goods dealer of Sialkot, and a bosom friend of Lala Kanshi Ram), Begam Barkat Ali (his wife), Munir Ahmad (their son), Nurul-Nisar

(their daughter) and other characters have been presented as different religious parties having distinct cultures.

The partition brings not only split of India into two countries but it also separates many families, relations and drives innocent civilians like Lala Kanshi Ram to unknown place away from their own home, for they belong to different religions i.e. Hindu and Sikh. Being banished from the original inhabitant Kanshi Ram and his lot lose home, business and other possession along with their attachment with the land. Now, he is neither a businessman known as Lala nor a renowned local leader of his people. He is just confined in a canvas in the refugee camp. It is entirely out of tolerance to Lala Kashi Ram to identify himself as an anonymous figure in his own home land. Soon the refugees are to be taken to India. The news of abduction of Hindu girls by Muslim, their rape, slaughter and violence has covered the air in the camp. Meanwhile Kanshi Ram receives a sad news that his only daughter and son-in-law are killed in a train while coming from Wazirpur to Sialkot. It leaves him entirely broken and his wife Prabha Rani goes to coma. She is traumatized in such a degree that she does not cry but, It look(s) as though blood [is] drained out of her face; she look(s) mummified. There was no movement in her lips. She didn't even flicker her eyelids. After a few moments she closed the eyelids and kept them closed. And then she opened them and they stayed open (Nahal 169). She becomes completely numbed because of trauma. The aura of destruction and tragedy has become common phenomena. The heart rending catastrophes that hit the Hindus and Sikhs are largely an outcome of religious prejudice.

Lala Kanshi Ram's journey symbolizes the profound transformation that follows trauma, particularly in the context of displacement. After being forced to leave his home in Sialkot due to Partition, Lala Kanshi Ram's identity as a prosperous Hindu merchant is shattered. The respect, security, and stability he once enjoyed in his homeland are gone, leaving him vulnerable and lost. As he crosses into the newly formed India, he must confront the harsh reality of becoming a refugee—no longer defined by his profession or community standing, but by his status as an uprooted individual. His transformation reflects the broader psychological and emotional impact of Partition, as Lala Kanshi Ram struggles to accept the loss of his previous life and adapt to the challenges of refugee existence. His attempts to rebuild his identity in post-Partition India involve both an internal struggle to maintain his dignity and an external fight to survive in a land that has little room for displaced individuals like him. His transformation is not just about physical survival but also about reimagining his place in a world that has fundamentally changed. This transformation is emblematic of the collective experience of countless individuals who had to redefine their lives and identities in the wake of Partition's destruction.

Despite the overwhelming violence, loss, and displacement that this novel portrays, the novel also reflects on the resilience of individuals and communities to rebuild their lives. Lala Kanshi Ram, while deeply traumatized, embodies a quiet determination to continue, despite the near-total destruction of the world he knew. His resilience, though subtle, is a testament to the broader endurance of those affected by the Partition. Across the novel, characters who have lost everything continue to seek stability, home, and a sense of self in the post-Partition world. This reflects a

broader theme of hope—that despite the atrocities of communal violence and the breaking apart of families and communities, there is a possibility of recovery. Communities, fragmented by violence, strive to reassemble themselves, finding new ways of living and connecting in an altered world. Lakhmir Singh rightly observes that, Nahal's purpose is not to depict history but to describe the impact of the historical tragedy of the partition on ordinary people. (Singh 226)

Chaman Nahal masterfully portrays the fragmentation of personal and collective identities in the aftermath of the Partition. Through the character of Lala Kanshi Ram, the novel explores how displacement and communal violence shatter one's sense of self, as individuals are forced to redefine their identities amidst chaos. Ultimately, the novel underscores the trauma of Partition, showing how characters like Lala Kanshi Ram must undergo emotional and cultural rebirth to cope with the immense loss they endure. This novel is not just a recounting of historical events but a profound exploration of the psychological and emotional impact of Partition on individuals and societies. This novel delves deep into the personal trauma caused by the violence and displacement, revealing how the human spirit struggles to adapt and rebuild in the face of overwhelming loss. The novel's enduring message is one of resilience, illustrating how, even when identities are fractured, people find ways to reconstruct their lives.

### **Conclusion**

This novel highlights resilience in the face of overwhelming loss. Despite the trauma, the characters strive to rebuild their lives, symbolizing the enduring human capacity for survival and emotional rebirth. Nahal's novel stands as a powerful exploration of the psychological and emotional toll of Partition, offering a poignant reflection on how individuals and communities can reconstruct their fractured identities in the aftermath of historical trauma. It remains a significant work in Partition literature, shedding light on the enduring scars of one of South Asia's darkest chapters. Nahal has attempted to present an authentic account of the horrific events that took place due to the partition. It is nothing less than a tragic novel. It should also be added that he did not try to criticize one religion against another in his novel, thus Nahal draws upon not only personal experiences but also historical and didactic and circumstantial ones. Hence, in the novel *Azadi*, it is vivid that the impact of trauma created by violence or any sorts of chronic prejudice action is everlasting, and the novelist Chaman Nahal has been successful to draw the picture of this reality in this novel.

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