



The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

DOI: [10.53032/tcl.2016.1.1.12](https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2016.1.1.12)

Chaman Nahal's *The Gandhi Quartet*: A Penultimate View

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Abstract

Chaman Nahal is a significant post-independence Indian English novelist. He has a rich creative output to his credit with ranges from literary criticism to philosophy and from translation of *The Bhagvad Gita* to nine novels and a collection of short stories. It is however for his novels that he is chiefly known. He has been awarded twice the federation of Indian publishers award, and his novel *Azadi* was given the Sahitya Academy Award, the highest award of the National Academy of Letter in India. Nahal's collection of short stories *The Weird Dance* came out in 1965 and was followed by his first novel, *My True Faces* in 1973. The maiden novel whose title has been taken from a popular religious song and embodies 'Vibhuti Yoga' enunciated in the tenth chapter of *The Gita* shows Nahal's broad vision of life. His next novel *Azadi*, which came out 1975, is his most celebrated novel. Written on the background of the independence of the nation in 1947 which also brought in its wake the partition of the country and its tragic consequences, the novel is a moving tale of human suffering as well human fortitude and hopes.

Keywords: Partition, Cruelty, Transition, Independence

Universal love which transcends all social, economic racial or national considerations is the theme of Nahal's next novel, *Into Another Dawn* (1977). The theme is sharply focused in the passionate union of two highly sensitive individuals. Ravi and Irene, one an unmarried Indian student and the other an American married woman. *The English Queens* came out in 1979. This is a satire on the slavish following of the English ways and language by the Indians. In *The Crown and the Loincloth* (1981) Chaman Nahal once again return to Indian freedom struggle. The focus this time was the non cooperation movement of the early 1920, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. As Nahal has taken care to point out basically the theme is human- "Our desire to live more honourably as human being." His next novel, *Sunrise in Fiji* came out after a gap of seven years in 1988. Nahal had not yet done with the Indian freedom struggle. He came back to it in his two successive novels. *The Salt of Life* (1990) and *The*

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Triumph of the Tricolour (1993). His latest published novel is *The Boy and the Mountain* (1997).

It was in 1993 that four of Nahal's novels- *Azadi The Crown and the Loincloth, The Salt of Life and The Triumph of the Tricolour* - were published as *The Gandhi Quartet*. The background of all these four novels is the Indian freedom movement, and the dominating figure in them is Mahatma Gandhi, though the story in these novels moves around two families – those of Thakur Shanti Nath and Lala Kanshi Ram. The volumes of this quartet have not been arranged according to their date of publication but according to the historical period that they depict. Thus *Azadi* the novel which was published first forms the last volume of this quartet as it shows the culmination of the freedom struggle in the independence and the partition of the country. *Azadi* enacts the hopeful dawn of Indian independence and the tragedy of the partition, the mass massacres and the vast influx of refugees. Spanning the period from the announcement of the Cabinet Mission Plan on June 3, 1947 to the aftermath, the murder of Mahatma Gandhi on January 30, 1948, the novel dramatises the impact of the momentous events of history on a few individuals, particularly on the members of the family of Lala Kanshi Ram, a tradesman of Sialkot who are uprooted and forced to go to India. It is a novel of epical dimension worthy of its theme. The tragedy of partition of the country and the communal violence that is created is the theme of this novel, but its real subject is man his hopes and fears, his love and hatred the eternal pull of God and Devil in him. The false dawn of Independence brings for Lala Kanshi Ram the darkness of death and deprivation. His daughter and son in law become a victim of communal violence, he himself has to leave behind not only the place he loved best on earth but also whatever he had built after a lifetime of industry. His son has to be separated from his love, Nur, a Muslim girl. Throughout the novel man is the victim of the forces of history which he cannot control and the passions generated by them which he cannot repress. The underlying irony of history of the *Azadi* resulting in partition, suffuses the author's attitude and finds expression through numerous ironies of events and characters. The final impression, however, that the novel leaves on us is not of gloomy pessimism but of resolute optimism. Lala Kanshi Ram at the end of the novel rises from the ashes of this ruin.

Accordingly, the first volume of *The Gandhi Quartet* is *The Crown and the Loincloth* which deals with the year 1915- 22 and shows the emergence of Gandhi on the Indian political scene. In *The Gandhi Quartet* it is Gandhi the national leader that is there before us because Nahal presents Gandhi from the point of his arrival in India, but he has presented the personal feelings, doubts, fears and struggles of Gandhi as well in his quarter.

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The first volume of *The Gandhi Quartet*, *The Crown* and the *Loincloth* begins with as description of Gandhi returning to India in 1915 from South Africa. South Africa had initiated Gandhi into politics had been there as a little Known Lawyer but returned from there after more than two decades as a mass leader of whom the world had taken note. It was in South Africa that he had perfected his political weapons of Satyagraha and civil disobedience. He had also established his Ashram Tolstoy Farm, there which would remain a model for his ashram at Sabarmati also. Any man possibly would have been happy at his achievements, but Nahal shows his Gandhi as being troubled by uncertainties and doubts. Shadows from his past come before him to make him question the decisions that he had taken. Though he finally drives all those uncertainties and doubts from his mind, they do come back to him at other occasions. By revealing the conflicts in the mind of Gandhi, Nahal has made him more human and more convincing and living as a character.

In the background of the freedom struggle and Gandhi the novel follows the fortunes of Thakur Shanti Nath, a landowner of Amritsar in the Punjab, and his family of eight all of whom are inexorably drawn into the hub of political activity, as Gandhi's ideology crystallizes into a policy of non violent resistance against the British. Into that webs are woven their private lives, which run their own course, though often parallel to the national one. Sunil, a son of the family and his wife Kusum, in particular, fight a hard battle with each other, which ends only with the death of Sunil. The endearing portrait of Keneth Ashby, a British ICS officer highlights the love for India many of the British displayed and the close bond that existed between them and the Indians. Thus the first volume of *The Gandhi Quartet* lays the foundation of the quartet by intruding all the major political and social issues that the country was having at that time.

The *Salt of Life* which constitutes the second volume of *The Gandhi Quartet* covers the period between 1930 and 1941. The novel takes up the link from *The Crown* and the *Loincloth* which was actually published nine years earlier. The story begins with Gandhi's famous Dandi March After the first phase of the Gandhian movement, which gave birth to the non cooperation movement, the political activities of the Congress had slowed down a bit. Gandhi had now for quite sometime been thinking of some mass movements that would galvanise the nation and this movement that he conceived of was the civil disobedience movement. He asks the whole Nation not to co-operate with the British rule at any level. He undertook the journey with a few of his followers but soon it caught the imagination of masses and the whole new was engulfed in a spirit of defiance. While Gandhi is getting ready to set out for Dandi Kusum informs him that she is marrying Raja Vishal Chand, the ruler of a small princely state. She had come to the Gandhi Ashram at Sabarmati in 1922 along with her son Vikram soon after her first husband, Sunil was killed while

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saving the Prince of Wales during an attempt on his life in Lahore. Vikram, now thirteen years old, elects to stay on in the Ashram and joins Gandhi in his famous Salt March. In 1941, Kusum is struck by tragedy a second time. Raja Vishal Chand dies in an accident, and she decides to return to Gandhi, who has since moved his ashram to Sevagram. In the political scenario a dramatic alternative to Gandhi is presented through the introduction of Bhagat Singh and Subash Chandra Bose, but Gandhi remains the master of the situation.

The Triumph of the Tricolour the third volume of the Gandhi Quartet, has as its background the Quit India Movement of 1942, Gandhi in once again the central figure, but the violent revolutionaries also play a significant role. The Triumph of the Tricolour take the story into the political turmoil in which the country found itself in 1940s. In comparison to the earlier two volumes, the third volume is more political in character. The personal relationships and problems are there but they are subjected to the pulls and pressures of the time. The novel begins with the Quit India Resolution passed by the Congress In 1942. The major powers of the world were involved in the Second World War and were divided into two camps- the Axis Powers comprising Germany, Italy and Japan and the Allied Powers consisting of England, France, Russia and America. England had taken India into the war without considering the popular Indian opinion in this regard. The Atlantic Charter signed by the British Prime Minister, Churchill and the American President, Roosevelt declared the restoration of the sovereignty of the nations to be the objective of the Allied powers, but soon afterwards, Churchill had declared that the Charter did not apply to India. This duality of attitude incensed the Indian leaders. They felt that the time had come to give a final Clarion call to the freedom fight against the British rule in India. The quit India resolution put in new determination in the Indians and they were now ready for Gandhi's call of 'Do or Die'. Soon all the important leaders were put behind bars and those who were not arrested quickly went underground. The leadership now passed on to the younger generation. Another important feature of the 1942 revolution was that the violent and non violent revolutionaries now worked together. Resistance to the government has turned into subversion of government activities and as such rail traffic was disrupted and telephone and telegraph lines were cut. This removed the line between the violent and nonviolent resistance. Chaman Nahal, in The Triumph of the Tricolour makes Gandhi take a rather soft attitude in this regard. Though Nahal's Gandhi refuses to dilute his version of non-violence for himself, he does allow others to interpret it according to the demand of the situation and in the light of his own wisdom.

Another important feature of this Indian freedom struggle was the emergence of the Indian National Army led by Subhash Chandra Bose. Bose had escaped from India by befooling the British police – an incident which has been described by Nahal in The Salt of

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Life. Bose succeeded in contacting Hitler and then from there went to Japan which was fighting England on the Asian front. With the help of the Indian soldiers captured in the war and the volunteers who had joined him, Bose had made the Indian National Army into a formidable force. Nahal in this novel described the movement of the I. N. A. He also hints at the shabby treatment it was given by the Japanese Army at different fronts, and asserts through Subhash Chandra Bose that had it been given a free hand at some of the occasions the outcome of the war would have been different on those fronts. Thus The Triumph of the Tricolour projects Subhas Chandra Bose at an equal footing with Gandhi. Kusum's two sons Vikram and Amit adopt different postures. Vikram, being the product of the Gandhi Ashram, follows the Gandhian path, Anil, 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 Indian's full freedom. While most of the Congress leaders accept office in that government, Vikram declines the honour. He instead opts to accompany Gandhi on his village to village walk to calm the communal frenzy. Kusum's family forms an alliance with Lala Kanshi Ram of Sialkot, whose family will be placed in Pakistan if the partition of India takes place.

Azadi, the last volume of the Quartet, begins with the partition of India and describes the vicissitudes in the life of Lala Kanshi Ram and his family. Chaman Nahal's description of the communal frenzy that took over the people of both the communities is so graphic that it fills us with terror and pity.

One thing that emerges predominantly from the novels of Chaman Nahal is his commitment to moral values to right action and to life itself. O. P. Mathur is right when he says that his novels are celebrations of life and of its qualities which give it meaning and significance.

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