

Women in Indian Independence in the Select Novels of Chaman Nahal

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Abstract

Chaman Nahal is the most significant writer of Indian English literature. He began his literary career as a short story writer and most remembered for his novel *Azadi* which sets on India's Independence and its partition. Nahal works out the universal themes of love, compassion, and understanding in national and international context. In all his four novels in *The Gandhi Quartet* Nahal portrays women as a dynamic force who render valuable service under the guidance of Gandhi in Indian Independence. This research paper investigates how Nahal's women characters establish their courage and defiance during the war of Indian Independence. Nahal has succeeded in depicting the awakening created by Gandhi among the womenfolk and his deep and abiding impact on their lives.

Keywords: women, independence, courage, contribution.

Introduction

The Indian-English writers of the Gandhian era have written their novels in response to historical events such as the Gandhian movement, the Independence struggle, partition and so on. These writers not only visualized Gandhi as a symbol of national pride but also an apostle of women's empowerment in their creative writings. The Indian English novelists of the first generation like R.K. Narayanan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao have either idealized women or allocated them a secondary position in their fictional world. In R.K.Narayan's novels *The Painter of signs* and *The Guide*, women never occupy a major role. Similarly, Mulk Raj Anand also relegates his women characters as submissive creatures. Chaman Nahal who considered as the second generation of Indian-English novelists has deviated himself from this conventional path. He is fully conscious of the fact that meek and submissive

characters do not defend for their identity. His women characters personify high resoluteness and defiance when they face up hazardous situations. In most of his novels Nahal has succeeded in documenting Gandhi's relationship to the women freedom fighters and his deep and abiding impact on their lives.

Chaman Nahal was popularly known as Chaman Nahal Azadi, was born in Sialkot, a province in the present day Pakistan, in 1927. He became a well renowned author with the publication of *Azadi* (1975) and it won him the coveted Sahitya Academi award in 1977. He has published eight novels and a collection of short stories entitled *The Weird Dance and Other Stories*. In addition, he has written two critical studies on Earnest Hemingway and D.H. Lawrence, a translation of Bhagavat Gita and a volume of critical essays on common wealth literature.

His novels reflect a sound commitment to moral values and traditional-modern differences of the contemporary Indian society. His fame more remains on *The Gandhi Quartet*. It deals with the wide-ranging incidents of freedom struggle. In *The Gandhi Quartet* his sequel of four novels, *The Crown and The Loincloth* (1981) covers the historical events such as Gandhi's return to India in 1915 and the Non- Cooperation movement. *The Salt of Life* centers on the Civil disobedience movement and the Salt Satyagraha. *The Triumph of Tricolor* (1993) delineates the Quit India movement and the Cabinet mission. His well-known work *Azadi* (1975) offers a brilliant expose of the tragedy of partition and its aftermath. The objective of this research paper is in *The Gandhi Quartet* Nahal's women characters exhibit a supreme courage and a great sense of free will when they are crushed down by the adverse circumstances during the freedom struggle.

The History of Indian Independence would be incomplete without the contribution of women. They were associated with the freedom struggle before the arrival of Gandhi and took part in the Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1905-1911) and in the Home rule movement. But after the arrival of Gandhi the participation of women took a new phase. Non-Cooperation movement and the rural Satyagraha of Bardoli and Barsad provided them a new role in the freedom struggle. Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi pandit, and Merabehan are the names remembered for their oceanic contribution in Indian Independence. They marched to prison discarding all their fineries and

adornments, wearing only handspun khadi and handmade chapels with immense pleasure. Gandhi's constructive programs such as picketing of liquor, opium and foreign clothes were exclusively done by women. P.N.Chopra in his pamphlet *Women in the Indian Freedom Struggle* writes the significant role played by the women before Gandhi's arrival:

Before Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) came to the forefront of the national movement and became its undisputed leader, two women, Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Sarojini Naidu (1874-1949), had already made a deep impact on the minds of Indian women. (9)

Chaman Nahal has treated both the Indian and foreign women characters with equal importance. Nahal's women characters are quiet busy with a brave fight to overpower the British is more noticeable in his later novels. All the four novels on the Gandhian theme are packed with remarkable women characters who lived in close proximity to Gandhi and supply selfless devotion during freedom struggle. Among them Kusum is the predominant character. Her husband Sunil is an avowed Gandhian who inspired her and dragged her in the freedom struggle. Initially, she confederates Sunil in spinning and weaving. It is quite significant that after Sunil's death she does not lead an austere life which is expected from the conventional society. Instead she becomes a full-fledged congress worker and fights for the liberation of the country. She discards all her costly jewels and sarees and involves fearlessly in the freedom struggle. Manmohan Kaur in his book *Women in India's freedom Struggle* writes:

Women contributed their bangles, nose rings, and bracelets to the national fund. In villages they had started putting away a handful of grain daily for this purpose. (91)

Nahal is eager to present a heroic role played by the women who accompanied the revolutionary groups on achieving freedom. Salma, a mistress of the direful revolutionary Darbara Singh, has played a major part in the attack on the visiting Prince of Wales. It is very important that she arranges three tongas for the revolutionaries without any fear and

defiance. One more character Charulatha, a revolutionary from Bengal pleads Rakesh to give her a chance to kill the Prince of Wales in order to take revenge upon the British.

“And if a women can create,
She can as easily uncreate.
I beseech of you today not any right to preserve
but my sight to destroy the prince.” (CL, 399)

Dulari, a mistress of a dedicative revolutionary, Joseph Daniel works in the telegraph office, helps the revolutionaries in sending and receiving coded messages. Abha, daughter of Rakesh is a medical student. When she learns of the sale of girls in Kashmir, she offers satyagraha in order to show her opposition to the authorities. Like her father she also proud to live for a cause.

Nahal introduces a foreign women character Celia Ashbey in an Indian backdrop of the freedom struggle. She is the aunt of Kenneth Ashbey, the assistant commissioner of Amritsar. She sees people making bonfire of foreign goods as part of the freedom struggle. Soon she is reinforced by the enthusiasm of the Indians and throws off her hat into the bonfire. She encourages the other people to cast off clothes. Nahal makes the reader clear that she is not a supporter of British. Rakesh says:

More than the Indians and the Britishers, this
American female knew intuitively, with her own
Intuitive, dark past behind her, the part of a nation
That had fought man and nature both and won, this
American women knew that it was the empire burning. (CL-173)

She takes the risks of following the revolutionary group, Himmat. She understands that revolutionaries are no less patriotic and wishes them for their success. Rakesh, the leader of Himmat moved by her words. He says:

Foreign sympathizers of the Indian cause: the Indian National

Congress itself was founded by a Britisher. Yet he had seen no
Foreigner openly act on behalf of the Indians in that fashion-
And a women, at that.(CL-188)

Celia Ashbey is unable to control the indignation when the British ill-treats the women agitators. It stuns her when she sees an officer makes the women half-naked by spraying the women a water hose. The people around them including Indians laugh at the drenched women. Here, Nahal mirrors that she has no allegiance to the British.

Along with the fictional characters, Nahal portrays the real life character Kasturba, the wife of Mahatma Gandhi. She is Gandhi's reasonable advisor and bitter critic. She always notices Gandhi to be restless and brooded with the upcoming violence and props him to face the unexpected challenges. She tries to comfort Gandhi and says what he needs to do in that critical juncture:

'What national situation? You can't put
new life so fast in a shackled nation.
Call off the Satyagraha if you want to.
And wait for the next opportunity to launch it again.' (CL-336)

Nahal also visualizes Kasturba as a potential force in motivating women in the freedom struggle. In 1913, after the death of Valliamma, she encouraged the Indian women of South Africa to fight for their rights. She exhorts the people to boycott the Prince of Wales and visits various provinces and appeals the women to boycott foreign goods and wear Khadi. She is always eager to prove that women are bold enough to take part in the freedom struggle and go to jail. The women play a significant role in the Salt march. Initially Gandhi's intention is not to allow women to participate in the general struggle and he wants them to reserve for some special work. Even though he selects a few women officially, by sunset it turns into a mass movement. Nahal in his novel *The Salt of Life* comments:

He would allow no women to march with
him to Dandi, he who was a champion of women,

he who had bought the Indian women from the prison
of their homes to the streets, he who had egged them
on to stand up for their rights, stand up for themselves. (SL-177)

The noble spirit of patriotism inflamed the men and women to undergo all sorts of deprivation and sufferings with a smiling face. When most of the men in prison, the women came forward from the seclusion of their homes and rendered their great service in the grim freedom struggle. Unfortunately, there are few evidences in the official records to the women who stood behind their men-folk in the freedom struggle against the alien rulers.

Conclusion

In analyzing the role of Nahal's women characters in the freedom movement, it thus becomes clear that his women characters have shown unlimited fortitude and turns the tormented episode of freedom struggle into a beautiful epic. They faces various tortures, exploitations and hardships with true spirit and undaunted courage to earn freedom. They can be the ample role models for the new generation and their vision of life assures and reminds the contemporary women that they too can change the destiny of the nation if they have sufficient courage. True to Gandhi's words 'the part the women of India played, will be written in letters of gold.'

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