



# Exploring Nation and History: An Analysis of Chaman Nahal's Selected Novels

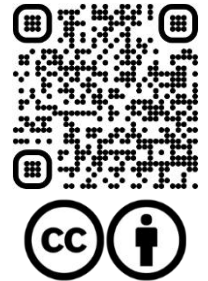
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**Abstract**— *The struggle for Indian independence spanned nearly a century and was an epic endeavor. The winds of change that swept across the Indian subcontinent after the 'Sepoy' Mutiny in 1857 left lasting imprints on the political and social landscape. The Indian nation had to overcome centuries of lethargy, transcend religious, caste, and provincial divisions, and move forward on the path of progress. This transformation occurred with the onset of the Gandhian movement, which disrupted established political and social norms, introducing innovative ideas and methods. Mahatma Gandhi's relentless pursuit of freedom marked significant milestones such as the non-violent non-cooperation movement of 1920-22, the civil disobedience movement of 1930-31, and the Quit India movement of 1942. The non-violent non-cooperation movement triggered an unparalleled awakening, shifting Indian nationalism from a "middle-class movement" to a widespread emotional movement. An exploration of Nahal's fiction reveals his alignment with the humanistic tradition pioneered by Anand in the thirties and carried forward by Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandaya in the fifties and sixties. Nahal's themes encompass tradition versus Westernization, spousal relationships, internationalism, East-West interactions, satire on anglicized Indians, the three phases of India's epic struggle for freedom, the partition of India into India and Muslim Pakistan, and the resulting agony for millions on both sides of the border.*

**Keywords**— *Civil Disobedience Movement, Freedom Movement, Humanistic tradition, Internationalism, Nationalism, Non-Cooperation Movement, The Quit India Movement.*



## INTRODUCTION

### Indian Nation and History:

Ernest Gellner, in "Nations and Nationalism" (1983), asserts that a sense of cultural belonging alone is insufficient to define a nation. Nationhood gains significance when closely linked to the aspiration for self-governance and the establishment of a state to manifest that aspiration.

The notion of a nation demands a clear definition. Various features are intertwined with the concept of a nation, encompassing social, cultural, and political dimensions of nationhood. These include the relationship between nation and state, the role of language, religion in national identity, historical connections, cultural bonds, and a distinct sense of 'nationhood.'

A nation is akin to a soul, a spiritual principle. Two elements, inherently unified, constitute this soul or spiritual essence. One element resides in the past, the other in the present. The former encompasses the collective ownership of a rich legacy of memories, while the latter embodies present-day consensus—the yearning to coexist and the determination to perpetuate the value of the heritage received in an indivisible form.

### Objectives:

The present research task has been undertaken with the following specific objectives in mind:

a- To provide an overview of the nation and its history in the post-independence era.

b- To focus on the issue of nationhood and explore historical aspects of India in relation to the selected novels.

c- This research study aims to contribute to the nation's understanding by examining events and episodes from the Freedom movement.

The research will primarily center around the theory of Nationalism.

a. The researcher will discuss national monuments, their historical significance, the national movement, massacres, and the Rowlatt Act. Additionally, opposing viewpoints and historical contexts related to the author Chaman Nahal will be addressed.

#### **Indian English Writers:**

Indian English fiction, post-independence, was propelled by eminent Indian writers such as Mulk Raj Anand. Anand's works, stemming from the Gandhian era, depicted Indian individuals under British rule and the diverse layers of society that influenced Indian culture. Anand strongly conveyed his aversion towards British governance. R.K. Narayan painted an authentic portrait of India, focusing on Malgudi, a rural town in South India populated by ordinary villagers, government employees, and other residents. Rabindranath Tagore, an illuminator of Indian thought, also penned novels that depicted society and human behavior. Another author, Bhabani Bhattacharya, created intricate social settings, predominantly narrated in the first person.

#### **Biographical Sketch of Chaman Nahal:**

Chaman Nahal was born in 1927 in Sialkot, a small town that is now part of Pakistan. He received his early education in Sialkot and obtained his M.A. in English from the University of Delhi in 1948. He served as a professor of English at Delhi University from 1980 to 1992. Renowned as a novelist, essayist, storywriter, and a versatile genius of post-modern Indian English Literature, Nahal's novels primarily delve into political, social, mythical issues, and Indian culture. His works revolve around politics and the struggle for freedom.

Chaman Nahal emerged as one of the most celebrated fictional writers in English in India. Numerous authors have drawn inspiration from his themes and writing techniques. Nahal, as an Indian English novelist, infuses his narratives with his own experiences and observations of those around him. His novels boast a comprehensive historical perspective, presenting a broad canvas of the periods he addresses.

In reference to Nahal's novel "Azadi," "The Seattle Times" from the U.S.A. aptly remarks:

"Here is India. Colorfully, penetratingly, amusingly...No one but an Indian could have written his book, and not many

Indians could have written his book, and not many Indians would do it as well as Chaman Nahal."

#### **Nation and History in the Select Novels of Chaman Nahal:**

India, the land of Ram and Krishna, embodiments of love; the land of Gandhi, the epitome of non-violence; the land of Maharana Pratap, the site of the Battle of Haldighati; the land of Shivaji, a symbol of valor. India is renowned as the home of sages like Guru Valmiki, who authored the Epic Ramayana, and Guru Vashistha, who composed the Mahabharata in 18 parvas. In days of yore, we boasted esteemed institutions like Valabhi, Takshashila (now located in Pakistan), and Nalanda (Bihar).

Ancient India was characterized by widespread and prevalent education. Within the realm of ancient Greater India, significant centers of learning existed in many prominent cities, attracting scholars from diverse corners of the world. One such hub of education resided in Gujarat, known as Valabhi, which served as the capital of the Maitrakas. People would journey from distant lands to partake in its knowledge.

Across history, India has held an unparalleled position worldwide, enriched by its economic, cultural, and religious heritage. Owing to its economic prosperity and cultural richness, India drew people from various nations. The European countries exhibited considerable demand for Indian spices, muslin, silk cloth, indigo, and more. Trade routes between India and Europe spanned both land and sea, with Istanbul (Constantinople) in Turkey serving as a pivotal hub for these exchanges.

#### **Azadi - Trauma of Partition:**

In this chapter, the researcher delves into the history and nation depicted by Chaman Nahal in his Gandhi Quartet. Comprising four books that focus on historical movements, Azadi is the fourth installment in The Gandhi Quartet series. However, Nahal authored it first, followed by the remaining three volumes.

Written between 1965 and 1975, The Gandhi Quartet is particularly noteworthy due to Nahal's personal experience of that tumultuous era. The series captures crucial historical events from India's struggle for freedom, showcasing the origins of concepts like the 'Charkha,' 'Awareness,' and 'Non-Cooperation Movement.' Nahal intertwines his narrative with historical occurrences such as Tea Plantation and Weaver Shop, creating a close bond between the novel and historical perspective.

Opening the novel, Nahal quotes the poetic lines of Rabindranath Tagore:

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not

been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; Where words come out from the depth of truth... Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit... Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

This chapter commences with an introduction to Chaman Nahal's "Azadi." It highlights various writings and criticisms on partition and nation, exposing research gaps and discussing the applicability of Rabindranath Tagore's theory of nationalism and Homi K. Bhabha's "Nation and Narration." These readings attempt to define and naturalize Third World "nations" by falsely homogenizing them, thereby reinforcing their subordinate status.

A nation encompasses elements such as religion, language, governance, cultural and historical ties. Certain political movements like conservatism and fascism align strongly with the nation and are significantly influenced by nationalism. A nation differs from a state in that it comprises people who share common characteristics and a sense of belonging.

Joseph Stalin contends, "A nation is primarily a community, a definite community of people." It isn't solely racial or tribal but a historically formed community. Nahal's historical novel "Azadi" deals with partition, a pivotal historical event. While professional historians analyze sequences of events and their circumstances, Nahal is more concerned with showcasing how the 1947 partition shattered a long-standing harmony.

"Azadi" narrates the distressing experiences and aftermath of the 1947 partition. Critics and writers have approached it from various perspectives. K.S. Ramamurthi notes the detailed event description's resemblance to Leo Tolstoy's narrative style. Iyengar comments on the nightmarish journey from Sialkot to Delhi, reminiscent of Tolstoy's novels.

N. Gunasekaran and V. Peruvalluthi assess "Azadi" in terms of the havoc partition wrought at both social and individual levels, covering themes like dual attitude, extensive killings, protagonist transformation, political aspects, aftermath, unity, healing, and historical trauma. They underline the novel's focus on partition's historical trauma, considering it a realistic record of the partition's horrors.

Nationalism and patriotism are distinct concepts. Patriotism, in George Orwell's words, is "devotion to a particular place and way of life." Nationalism involves according cultural and political significance to a distinctive group within a nation.

### **The Crown and the Loincloth:**

Chaman Nahal's "The Crown and the Loincloth," which constitutes the opening volume of *The Gandhi Quartet*, delves into India's struggle for freedom from 1915 to 1922.

Nahal initiates the novel with an account of Gandhiji's return to India in 1915 following his "Experiments with Truth" in South Africa aboard the ship S.S. Arabia. Over the course of a year, he traverses the country, educating people about the significance of nonviolent resistance against British rule through speeches and writings in "Young India" and "Navjivan." When the imperialist government enacts the oppressive Rowlatt Bills, he urges people to observe a hartal (strike) and fast for a day to protest against them. Influenced by Gandhiji's philosophy of nonviolence, Sunil, the son of Thakur Shanti Nath from the Punjab village of Ajitha, participates in the hartal. Heeding Gandhi's advice, Sunil encourages villagers to engage in spinning and weaving.

Key historical events, such as Gandhiji's return from South Africa, the Rowlatt Act, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, and the spinning wheel movement, serve as the backdrop for the novel. The British are greatly concerned by Gandhiji's mass appeal and charisma. In response, they decide to counter it by inviting the Prince of Wales to India, aware that most Indians would boycott the visit due to Gandhi's 1920 call for a boycott. Despite their expectations, thousands of people flood the streets, welcoming the Prince with black flags and chants of "Go back home."

As an astute observation on the title:

"The title symbolically suggests the theme—a battle between two unequal forces: The Crown and the Loincloth. It signifies the power of rulers versus the power of the subjugated masses, the 'Mighty British Empire' represented by the crown, contrasting with the newly awakened India under the leadership of Gandhiji, embodied by the flimsy loincloth."

Gandhiji, driven by boundless love and compassion for suffering humanity, places little importance on his family, including his wife and children. He instead cares deeply for the countless sons of India. "The Crown and the Loincloth" explores the theme of embracing human qualities such as love, affection, faith, and sacrifice.

### **The Salt of Life:**

Continuing the Gandhi Saga, Chaman Nahal presents "The Salt of Life" (1993), which serves as the second volume of *The Gandhi Quartet*. This novel predominantly explores the historic Dandi March led by Gandhiji, his reliance on his followers during challenging times, and his efforts to empower women to contribute more effectively to the

freedom struggle. Nahal also sheds light on parallel movements in India's fight for independence led by Subhash Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh.

Chaman Nahal commences the novel with a somewhat pessimistic tone. In 1929, Gandhiji grapples with a sense of defeat due to the persistent demand for foreign goods among the people. Lingering animosities between Hindus and Muslims and the practice of untouchability still prevail. To the dismay of many, the British continue to rule India. To address this, Gandhiji seeks a new approach to channel the people's discontent, leading him to the concept of Salt Satyagraha. The Salt Satyagraha incorporates elements of strategic surprise, widespread mobilization, discipline, organization, simple tactics, universal availability of means, and encircling the enemy forces—a dramatic endeavor.

Nahal divides the novel into three parts: "Whispers," "Tempers," and "Choices." Following the initial successful mass movement, a lull occurs in India's political arena. Gandhiji lacks a new action plan to offer to a nation oppressed by imperialistic rule.

In the first part, "Whispers," Nahal emphasizes the lull after the initial success. Gandhiji grapples with a lack of fresh strategies for a nation burdened by imperialistic rule.

In the second part, "Tempers," Nahal vividly portrays the emotions of the British, Gandhiji, and his followers during and after the momentous Dandi March. Gandhiji recognizes he's marching against a formidable foe that doesn't hesitate to use force against his nonviolent followers. Nevertheless, he remains undeterred, determined to reach Dandi while stating, "he would laugh and dance his way to Dandi...the goal would be his." The Salt Satyagraha ignites the entire nation.

In the third part, "Choices," Nahal emphasizes the study of history as an exploration of alternative choices available to a people at a specific time. Between 1930 and 1940, India had choices in Gandhiji, Subhas Bose, and Bhagat Singh. Many opt for Gandhiji, participating in nonviolent non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements. They endure hardships in their quest for liberation. The Muslim Conference in 1940 declares its intention to fight for a free India, envisioning "a free Hindu India as one unit" and "a free Muslim India as the other unit."

Chaman Nahal's Gandhi Quartet captures one of India's most tumultuous periods in history. Although "Azadi" was written first, it occupies the final position in terms of chronological events. The novel earned Nahal an Akademi Award in 1977. Nahal's unique quality as a historical novelist lies in his impartiality and avoidance of taking sides.

N. Radhakrishnan notes that Chaman Nahal's "Azadi" differs refreshingly in tone and execution from other partition novels. For the first time in Indo-Anglian fiction, a novel presents a mature, balanced perspective of the holocaust. It stands as a mature work of art, devoid of sentimentality and melodrama.

## CONCLUSION

The Gandhi Quartet provides an encompassing narrative of India's struggle for freedom, taking readers on a fictional journey spanning from the JallianwalaBagh Massacre in 1919 to Gandhiji's passing in 1948. The quartet's inaugural installment, "Azadi," narrates Gandhiji's life in South Africa, his experiments with truth and nonviolence, covering the years 1915 to 1922. It portrays pivotal events such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the boycott of foreign goods, the rise of khadi clothing, and the Prince of Wales' journey.

The second volume, "The Salt of Life," delves into the period from 1922 to 1939, spanning Gandhiji's arrest and the commencement of World War II. It captures significant historical moments, including the Salt Satyagraha, the Dandi March, the Civil Disobedience Movement, the execution of Bhagat Singh, the establishment of the Muslim League, and the formation of the Forward Block Party by Bose.

In this research study, the selection of particular novels deliberately aims to introduce religious and ethnic objectivity. The novels chosen revolve around a central theme: partition and its impact on the diverse fabric of Indian society. By depicting the historical event of India's 1947 partition, along with its crisis, the inhuman acts, the fanaticism-driven brutality, and the holocaust experienced by various societal segments, the authors contribute a fictional discourse that effectively portrays the complexities of this tumultuous period.

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