



## GANDHIAN THOUGHT IN CHAMAN NAHAL'S THE GANDHI QUARTET

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### ABSTRACT

*Indian writers in English have made important contribution in the field of English novel. In the early 20th century Gandhian thought made a deep impact in a variety of ways on the creative writers of India. Of all the Indian writers who have used Gandhi for their creative purposes, Chaman Nahal is the most significant. His The Gandhi Quartet is a landmark in the annals of Indian English fiction which consists of the novels like The Crown and the Loincloth, The Salt of Life, The Triumph of the Tricolour and Azadi. The Gandhi Quartet successfully reconstructs the three stages of India's struggle for freedom- the non-cooperation movement, the civil disobedience movement and the Quit India movement of 1942. It also gives a moving account of the division of India into India and Pakistan, and the disaster that follows it. In the end, Nahal seems to suggest that a return to Gandhi is the only solution to the problems people face today. Viewed in this context, The Gandhi Quartet of Chaman Nahal acquires a greater significance, as it reminds us in unflinching terms, of the need to hold fast to the Gandhian ideals in a world torn apart by narrow sectarian and communal considerations.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the early 20th century Gandhian thought made a deep impact in a variety of ways on the creative writers of India. The novels of thirties and forties, when analyzed in the context of Gandhian thought fall into a pattern and presents a clear contrast to the novels written during 19th century in India. However, there is a sudden flowering in the writing of fiction in English in the thirties. The synthesis of East and West which Gandhian thought achieved made a deep impact on Indo-English novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and

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Bhabani Bhattacharya. All of them were already familiar with western thought and literary traditions, but it was in Gandhian thought that they discovered a frame of reference for their creative work. They directly fell under Gandhiji's spell and began writing thereafter fictional works, the main inspiration of which derives from Gandhian way of thinking.

It is obvious that prior to the advent of Gandhi the Indian novels written in English were far removed from contemporary social and political reality. It is only with the advent of Gandhi that a fundamental change is perceptible. K.S. Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Manohar Malgaokar and Chaman Nahal gave expression in their fictional writings to the impact of Gandhi on the masses and the freedom struggle led by him. However, as has been pointed out in the course of the discussion, these novelists absorbed Gandhian thought in different ways, each according to his own intellectual predilections and artistic needs.

Of all the Indian writers who have used Gandhi for their creative purposes, Chaman Nahal is the most significant. No one has written so extensively on Gandhi as Nahal. His *The Gandhi Quartet* is a landmark in the annals of Indian English fiction which consists of the novels like *The Crown and the Loincloth*, *The Salt of Life*, *The Triumph of the Tricolour* and *Azadi*. *The Gandhi Quartet* successfully reconstructs the three stages of India's struggle for freedom- the non-cooperation movement of 1920-22, the civil disobedience movement of 1930-31 and the Quit India movement of 1942. It also gives a moving account of the division of India into India and Pakistan, and the disaster that follows it. Nahal portrays nearly two hundred characters representing different ethnic groups and the enigmatic personality of Gandhi. Taken as a single entity, *The Gandhi Quartet* constitutes the most extensive Commonwealth novel.

*The Crown and the Loincloth*, the first volume of the Quartet series, narrates the conflict between the British Government represented by the crown and national movement for freedom led by Gandhi, represented by loincloth. It describes how Gandhiji revitalizes the slumbering spirit of the Indians and opens their eyes to the need and effectiveness of fighting the British government unitedly. It establishes Gandhiji as a leader of the masses, par excellence. It projects Gandhi at the macro level and Sunil at the micro level. Nahal vindicates the nobility of non-violence over terrorism by making Sunil sacrifices his life while trying to save the Prince of Wales.

*The Salt of Life*, second volume of *The Gandhi Quartet*, concerns itself with Gandhi's epoch-making Dandi March of 1930. It shows Gandhiji's deep concern for his followers, including women, and his unflinching faith in them. Nahal narrates how Kusum, "a devoted follower" of Gandhi, marries Raja Vishal Chand and leaves Gandhi's Ashram, while Vikram, her son



by Sunil, stays with Gandhi. Vikram though a teen ager, walks with Gandhi to Dandi and breaks the salt law. After the Raja's death, Kusum returns to Gandhi.

In *The Triumph of Tricolour*, which is designed as the third part of *The Gandhi Quartet*, Nahal continues the Gandhi saga, but this time with a difference. It mainly deals with the Quit India movement. Though Gandhi continues to be the dominating presence, the novelist's chief concern seems to be weaving the fabric of the freedom struggle with the crimson strands of the revolutionary trends. It shows the rise of Subhas Bose and the violent revolutionaries "in the challenge to the British rule". Amit, Kusum's son by Raja Vishal Chand, joins the revolutionaries while Vikram is inclined towards the Gandhian path. Vikram refuses to accept office in the interim government. Instead, he joins Gandhi in the latter's effort to offer healing touch to the victims of communal frenzy. These trends and movements which the British Raj was determined to crush with an iron hand now began to gain momentum with the declaration of the Second World War. Nahal narrates how; the divergent trends of the freedom struggle get merged at some point to spearhead for a grand finale:

*Even the Marxists wore Khadi, which had somehow become the trade mark of any revolutionary. But along with the Khadi clothes, they also put on a bit of Gandhian Ideology which now permeated every nook and corner of the country. (Chaudhary, 19)*

*Azadi* which is devoted to India's partition is "neither a romantic nor a political tale, but an intensely moving human saga of displacement and loss of identity" (Reddy, 165). Nahal describes in detail the detestable inhuman acts committed both by the Hindus and Muslims against one another. The harrowing events associated with the partition are presented mainly through the family and friends of Lala Kanshi Ram of Sialkot. They lose everything including the ability to communicate. During their journey to Delhi, they are shocked to see how "a section of humanity occasionally lapse into a wild and barbaric state of mind and betray their heritage by inexplicably indulging in fiendish behavior towards their fellowmen less powerfully placed" (Dhillon, 30).

In spite of the harrowing experiences that Nahal describes, there is an underlying current of healthy optimism and a sort of moral vision that illumines the otherwise dark horizon of communal frenzy. When the majority is subjected to fits of fury, thereby losing their reasoning capacity, a few retain their essential goodness and sense of basic human values. The birth of child to Isher Kaur in the train compartment ushers in a ray of hope. Lala Kanshi Ram's declaration, "I have ceased to hate" (338) carries the weight of the agony he went through in reaching such a state of mental poise. Like Lala Kanshi Ram, Chaudhary Barkat Ali who lived the life of a true Muslim and believed in the nobility of all religions, is a true



Gandhian. Narrow minded sectarian thoughts have no place in his mind. Even under compelling adverse circumstances, he exhibits great fortitude and is not swayed by communal considerations.

To Gandhi, the word “freedom” or “Azadi” had a greater connotation than mere freedom from a colonial rule. To him, the word signified Man’s freedom from all sorts of bondages that stifle his growth. The message of love and friendship incidentally is the motto of the novel which Nahal gives in the words of Rabindranath Tagore at the very outset of his narrative. Perhaps the best tribute to Gandhi is provided in the novel by Sunanda, when she says, “man like him come once in centuries” (366). It is immensely significant that of all the characters in the novel, the author has handpicked her to utter these words.

The Epilogue at the end of *Azadi* successfully connects all the four volumes of *The Gandhi Quartet*. It gives none-too-happy but true picture of post-independence India. In the end, Nahal seems to suggest that a return to Gandhi is the only solution to the problems people face today. The Epilogue to *Azadi*, like Shaw’s “Epilogue” to *Saint Joan*, forms an integral part to *The Gandhi Quartet*.

A study of *The Gandhian Quartet* reveals that Nahal succeeds in his attempt to chronicle the modern heroic age which is usually identified with Gandhi. It also shows how under Gandhi’s impact, his followers like Kusum, Sunil, and Vikram are transformed from the ordinary to the heroic. Gandhi firmly believes: “all men had the inner capacity to remould themselves to the strong willed, to be fearless and death-defying, to be true “Satyagrahis.”(Bhattacharya) He brilliantly succeeds in rallying the masses round him in his struggle against the British, despite their repressive measures. He makes the people realize the need to end political subjection through non-violent measures because he is aware that-

*It was not difficult for this state to neutralize and control those forces which either followed the strategy of constitutional opposition (pre-Gandhian phase of the Congress) or attempted to evolve an insurrectionary strategy to overthrow the British rule (the revolutionary insurrectionists of Bengal, later on Gadar party and Bhagat Singh and finally the communists). Gandhi succeeded in avoiding these two pitfalls of constitutionalist politics and insurrectionary politics and evolved a new paradigm to confront the colonial state-the paradigm of peaceful movements (Josh, 52).*

Gandhi was more concerned than any other leader with the welfare of the untouchables. While he was prepared even to sacrifice his life in the process of eradicating untouchability,



Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi's political heir, complained that the Mahatma was, "choosing a side issue for his final sacrifice!" (Mani, 83)

Gandhi's love for the masses and his selfless devotion to their cause, make them repose unwavering faith in him. As a result, even in his absence they take part in the Quit India Movement without any fear of repercussions:

*The essential secret of the Mahatma's power over the Indian people is this. The power of the people lay repressed, dormant and stunted within their beings. When the love of the Mahatma flowed into the masses, their own power was stimulated out of a wretched languor. And, in passionate gratitude they let their exuberating power of which he was the inspiration flow back to him (Mani, 98).*

Nahal narrates how Gandhi gave a new interpretation to accepted Hindu notions of femininity and succeeded in making women also become active political and social agents in the freedom movement. He asked them: "to develop talents they were best suited to; they were to spin, rear their children in the spirit of "swadeshi", non-violence and "dharma" (Karlekar, 52). It is gratifying to note that today women are -

*Mobilizing themselves on a range of ecological, political and social issues .....are looking once more to Gandhian alternatives and to his view of religious and social tolerance .....by using effectively proven tools of social and political protest, women are becoming an influential force in specific areas (368).*

Nahal gives a moving picture of how Gandhi, even before India gained independence, becomes a disillusioned man because of the growing indifference of the Congress intellectuals to his programme of non-violence and khadi. When Patrick-Lawrence asks Gandhi in *The Triumph of the Tricolour* whether he would accept the proposals of the Cabinet Mission, Gandhi says:

*"That's for the congress to decide," he said, going into his proverbial smile. "I am nobody in the Congress." (429)*

In the end, his failure to wean Jinnah away from his two-nation theory and the disaster that followed partition break the heart of the apostle of peace:



*The second (non-violent action) was to Gandhi himself a failure, as independence was accompanied by partition and communal frenzy because India had accepted non-violence as policy and not as creed. (Gopal, 3)*

In short, Nahal presents a deeply realistic, highly convincing and an unusually candid portrayal of Gandhi in *The Gandhi Quartet*.

Thus, we can say that in all these novels, Gandhi or characters modeled on Gandhi serve specific ends which at once absolve the novelist of the need to go deep into the many faceted implications of Gandhism in its totality. Chaman Nahal is fully conscious of the fact that the delineation of the life and message of a stalwart like Mahatma Gandhi, with the intention of bringing into focus his integrated view of life is, if anything, an uphill task. But Gandhi, more than anyone else, had exerted such a great influence on Nahal's vision of life that he wanted to project Gandhi as "a symbol of moral and spiritual strength triumphing over physical odds" (33).

Chaman Nahal in *The Gandhi Quartet* takes meticulous care to bring in characters and situations by which he is able to highlight the main features of Gandhian philosophy. Nahal's Gandhi in *The Gandhi Quartet* is never a static character. The gradual unfolding of his personality is carried out with the focus always on his inner development, consistent with the great ideals he cherished and which he put to harness for the great purpose at hand. Nahal brings out in vivid colours instances of his essential tactfulness, his immense capacity to move the masses, his unrelenting bend of mind in upholding the values he cherished, his concern for the seemingly unimportant matters of life and his intense personal conflicts that led him to the core of truth.

Most of the novels on Gandhian theme were written when Gandhi was a living inspiration or soon after his assassination. How far these novelists have succeeded in interpreting the Gandhian ideology in consonance with the changing times, is worth looking into. The contemporary scene, however, is not much encouraging. It may be because the present day writers do not have the benefit of the living presence of Gandhi or even Gandhians worth emulating. The contemporary Indian-English writers of fiction, as Kai Nicholson observes, are more concerned with the disintegration of "those ideals which had banded together the writers of the "Heroic Age". However, this does not absolve the Indian writers of the sin of ignoring the teachings of Gandhi, which by their very universality, transcend ages. "Just as *The Bhagwat Gita* relates to all historical periods", notes the Australian born Gandhian, Stephen Murphy, equally the principles and beliefs for which Gandhi stands belong to no one period of history. They are equally timeless.



Viewed in this context, *The Gandhi Quartet* of Chaman Nahal acquires a greater significance, as it reminds us in unflinching terms, of the need to hold fast to the Gandhian ideals in a world torn apart by narrow sectarian and communal considerations.

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