CHAPTER III

Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* and
Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*

“where there is power there is resistance”

(Michael Foucault, *History of Sexuality*)

The post-colonial text carries an unignorable historic weight. If viewed in particular historical context the post-colonial texts denote a particular sense of theme, issues and values, with which the literary text of those a reas are concerned. According to Raymond Williams, “The real human dimension in which works of art are made and valued can be reached through a sense of history, which is a form of collective memory continually revised” (Williams 18). Hence we see that a series of subsequent attempts to regain their identity has been made by the writers of the post-colonial era and Indian writers in particular have contributed significantly to the overall development in this field. Novel, for the post-colonial writer has become an instrument of self discovery through which he finds his historical roots, his identity and that of his people too.
After the crop of those writers who cherished the bygone days of struggle and remembered the entire episode not without nostalgia, came those who felt the impact in a different way. For them freedom meant withdrawal of

...foreign yoke, no doubt, but it also meant the humiliation of the partition of India, the horror of communal paroxysm, the unendurable agony and sufferings of uprooted masses who had become strangers and “refugees in [their] own country, too, without crossing the border!” (Sharma 3)

These novels, though, written in a later period, portray the pre-independence and recently independent scenario. The issues discussed in these novels are Indian Nationalism and British Colonialism on the one hand and religious fanaticism on the other. In the previous chapter we had discussed novels which dealt with the rise of nationalism and its myriad connotations. The present chapter attempts to explore the nature of freedom attained and its impact in the form of the holocaust in the wake of India’s partition. The two novels taken up in this chapter are Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* and Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*.

In *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) Malgonkar focuses his attention to the turbulent years of the pre-independence phase of Indian History. One of the leading Indian novelists in English, Malgonkar, is primarily hailed as a Maratha historian. He turned to fiction writing with a purpose — the purpose of “pure entertainment”. Yet his roots are in history and his fictional world traces the tensions of Indian political history. His novel *A Bend in the Ganges* presents a cogent account of political history of the 30s and 40s — unfolding an epic movement for independence and its attainment at the cost of the
division of the subcontinent. The basic pattern in the novels of Malgonkar has more than often been the individual predicament of being stranded at crossroads and faced with a moral dilemma or the individual striving hard to seek his identity. In _A Bend in the Ganges_ too, we find the classic situation of a man beset by conflicting values brought on by external, quite often historical changes, yet the entire background is enriched by the detailed accounts of social, political and historical circumstances and has been vividly portrayed and illustrated with a comprehensiveness and through sweeping accounts of the holocaust. N. S. Pradhan writes:

In fact, so powerful and precise is his historical vision that at times his novels read like documentary, true-life accounts of the tempestuous events described. Quite often, his focus shifts from the individual to the event the presentation of which is marked by sharp detail, epic dimension and genuine authenticity. (Pradhan 139)

Gian Talwar and Debi Dayal are the two major characters of the novel _A Bend in the Ganges_. They are the two major symbols and through them the “author’s vision gets defined and clarified” (Amur 113). These two characters are a study in contrast with Gian, a representative of the traditional product of lower middle-class, rather pedestrian background on one hand and on the other hand Debi, the scion of a rich aristocratic family who takes his wealth for granted. Though these characters are typically defined yet the world they live in and which the author has created around these symbols is a highly inclusive world. In fact, G. S. Amur refutes the charges of misleading documentation of Indian life in Malgonkar’s novels in the following words:
I do not know what evidence David McCutchion had when he wrote: ‘…the fascination of Indian writing in English lies more in the phenomenon itself than its documentation of Indian life, which may be hopelessly misleading.’ But such a charge is certainly not true of *A Bend in the Ganges* which is a carefully documented novel. (Amur 113)

The novel shows the fine religious and cultural harmony existing between Hindu and Muslim who formed a ‘Ram and Rahim Club’, a united struggle front, to oust the British from their country. Malgonkar like a true historian vividly depicts the Indian rural and aristocratic life, the Indian social set up in those days of struggle for Independence, the political scenario with the backdrop of the Second World War, the account of the convicts in the Cellular Jail and the holocaust of the Partition. Malgonkar whose roots are deeply embedded in history has his fictional world trace the tensions of Indian political history. *A Bend in the Ganges* presents a convincing account of the political history of the 30s and 40s and unfolds an epic movement for independence and its attainment at the cost of the division. The beginning of the novel faithfully documents the socio-political and historical set up of India in the 1930s with the burning of British goods:

They were burning British garments. The fire that raged in the market square was just one of hundreds of thousands of similar fires all over the country. On one side was the platform, the enormous tricolour flag with the spinning-wheel providing its backdrop. On the milk-white cloth spread on the platform, flanked by a dozen or so solemn-faced men in white caps, squatted the dark, frail man who was the leader of their struggle. (7)
Gian Talwar is an orthodox Brahmin. He belongs to a lower middle-class family which was once prosperous. He hails from a small village, Konshet, and at the centre of Konshet is the divided family of Talwars, the hereditary landlords. The family of Gian Talwar has fallen on bad days due to the rivalry between the Big House and the Little House over the piece of land at Piploda. Gian is a college-going young man who, like many enthusiasts of his time, is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and his ideals of Truth and Non-violence. He comes to Duriabad out of the rural depths of Punjab in pursuit of higher education and is exposed to Gandhi’s influence. The novel begins with Gian attending a procession of Mahatma Gandhi where his lieutenants urge the countrymen to boycott British goods. Gian founds himself under the spell of the Mahatma and the words of Mahatma become a sort of silent, private prayer to him, “The path of ahimsa is not for the cowards” (10). He throws his valued blazer into the bonfire in which people are burning their foreign clothes. In the very next chapter the author exposes the weakness in the character of Gian Talwar and manifests openly that Gian is not the hero of the novel as could have been anticipated by the readers. Gian’s act of discarding his janwa only strengthens the fact that he is weak and unheroic and can only be an ironic symbol of non-violence. The crucial incident of Hari’s (Gian’s brother) murder reveals to Gian not only his own inadequacy and cowardice but the unreality of non-violence as a way of life. He doesn’t have to think twice in discarding non-violence as his involvement was only skin deep. He seeks out Vishnu Dutt, Hari’s murderer and kills him. Gian’s pseudo-nationalism too comes to the surface when he shows allegiance to all Englishmen and holds them in high admiration for the reason that against the corrupt and thoroughly degenerate petty Indian officials, the English were ‘fair and just.’ In Hari’s words:
We were lucky there was a British judge — no question of bribing him, though the Big House must have done their best. Remember that. We in India can get justice only at British hands — never from our own people. They are clean — clean as grains of washed rice. (28)

Debi Dayal on the other hand is the only son of Dewan Bahadur Tekchand Kerwad. His family has lived in Duriabad for over a hundred years and owns large tracts of land along the canals. They also own the Kerwad Construction Company and the Kerwad Housing Development. Debi takes all this wealth for granted and at the same time just like all the Indians bears hatred towards the British though his patriotic idealism is, to some extent, personal and psychological. He burns with an indiscriminate hatred for the English, having been witness as a child to an attempted rape of his mother by a drunken English soldier. If Gian has been introduced as a follower of Gandhi and non-violence, Debi represents the class of nationalists who believe that the only way India can attain independence is through violence. Malgonkar though does not want the readers to be under any kind of impression. If Gian’s beliefs are skin deep so too are Debi’s. His liberated, pseudo-intellectual lifestyle and rather unbending pride finds expression in Gian’s thoughts:

So that was what they were drinking to, the scion of the Kerwad family and his friends, all dressed in fashionable swimming trunks and drinking iced beer imported from Germany. The dreaded name hung in the air, like a blob of oil on water. (17)
Debi, like Shafi Usman and many other young revolutionaries, is shown to be motivated by personal reasons. But unlike Gian with his limited rural horizons, Debi has a real involvement in his country’s political life and is prepared to make the highest sacrifice. He belonged to a group of revolutionaries who called themselves ‘Freedom Fighters’ and prided themselves on being the most successful band of terrorists outside Bengal. They were also proud of the fact that their leader Shafi Usman, was the most ‘wanted’ man in the state. The group had nothing but contempt for the non-violent agitation of Mahatma Gandhi and his followers. The tragic description of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and its relevance in Shafi’s life brings out the contempt against Gandhi and more so against the ideal of non-violence. Shafi here acts as the spokesman for the novelist when he says:

‘The poor man had nothing to do with Mr Gandhi’s non-co-operation movement,’

Shafi had told them. ‘If anything, he was in the opposite camp, a staunch supporter of British rule in India. He had merely strayed into the Bagh to see what was happening and could not have been there for more than a few minutes when General Dyer ordered his machine guns to open fire. Within minutes, there were 379 dead and over a thousand wounded.’ (75)

Shafi’s own father was one of the dead and as a boy of seven he was taken to the site of the massacre and was asked to identify his father from a heap of other obscenely flung dead bodies. Later while returning home from the funeral he and his mother and many more were made to crawl on their bellies because “General Dyer had promulgated what was called the crawling order” (75). It was this insult that Shafi had to avenge. He
and his gang had been actively involved with various terrorist activities in and around Duriabad. They had been instrumental in burning down Forest Rest houses, derailing goods trains, removing fish plates from the railway tracks, etc. Ultimately, Debi is arrested for his involvement in the sabotage of the Air Force plane which he and Shafi had set on fire using explosives from the Kerwad Construction Company’s godown. Shafi and Debi’s father Tekchand Kerwad are instrumental in getting him arrested. He is convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Cellular Jail. It is here that Debi and Gian once again confront each other as Gian too is sentenced to serve his jail term in the Cellular Jail for the murder of Vishnu Dutt.

The contrast between the two characters continues in this section of the novel too. Gian’s weakness, opportunism and his sole concern about his own survival stands in stark contrast to Debi’s strength, his defiant spirit and his dedication to the cause of serving his nation. In Cellular Jail, too, Gian shows his great administration for the British and their standards of justice. He has no intention of going back to India and decides to settle down and restart his life on the islands. His moral decadence continues even in the jail. He does not give a second thought in cooperating with the Jail Superintendent, Patrick Mulligan, and his minions. He is the one who blows the whistle on Debi for whom his secret admiration as a nationalist and a hero remain undiminished. He acts as an ‘administrative spy’ on Debi and foils his plan to escape from the jail. Debi is publicly flogged for this but his resilience wins him the heart and admiration of the rest of the jail inmates. The inmates vied with each other to do little chores for Debi. On the other hand, Gian was looked upon with contempt. Gian, too, is undergoing remorse this time and at the next possible opportunity apologizes to Debi and asks him to join him and a few other
convicts in their plan to escape from the island. But Debi no longer believes him and reminds him of his lost ideals. He says:

‘Do you remember talking about truth and non-violence?’ Debi Dayal asked.

‘You gave up non-violence when you killed a man, I don’t know when you abandoned the truth…. You are scum; you are far worse than Balbahadur because he at least is openly hostile — you spout truth and non-violence. You are the sort of man through whom men like Mulligan rule our country, keep us enslaved; you are a slave working for the masters, proud of the service he renders, hankering after the rewards.’ (198)

Although Gian feels a sense of remorse on his behaviour yet greed and the instinct for survival continues to dominate him. His plans of escape are upset by the arrival of the Japanese on the island but he still is lucky in that he is rescued by the destroyer which arrives to collect the British on the Islands. He reaches India, poses to be a friend of Deb i Dayal and manages to secure a job from his father, Tekchand, as Gian Joshi, Shipment Supervisor in Bombay for Kerwad Construction Company.

The English become guilty of the greatest betrayal of all when they run away at the Burma front, leaving behind tho usands of Indian soldiers to fend for themselves. Their action belies their traditional colonial image as responsible guardians and ‘mai-baap’ of their subjects. The Japanese, who initially raise a lot of hope and friendly feelings as the saviours of Andam an, belie these notions with greater cruelty and ruthlessness. Debi soon sees the Japanese in their true colours and feels disheartened and disillusioned. “He finds that both the brands of world conquerors — the British and the
Japanese — are equally obnoxious” (Amur 110). The meeting between the Indian Brigadier — the very picture of ‘India’s ingrained servility’ — and the Japanese officers in Rangoon, and the sight of thousands of Indian refugees left stranded on the island in the face of adversity by the British leaves a distressing impact on Debi and he finds himself through with violence and politics. He, who was chosen by the Japanese to go back to India as their agent ‘betrays’ them by hiding himself for the remaining period of the war. Like Gian, he too drops his identity and takes on a new one as Kaluram and withdraws himself into the quiet surroundings in the north-western corners of Assam and waits for the war to get over. He feels that a sea change has come in his revolutionary spirit and even his urge for revenge on Shafi has weakened too. The dilemma that he is facing is presented in the following words:

He was determined to keep out of the struggle, not to side with either the British or the Japanese; that much was clear… he wondered whether all the exposure to what Gandhi had described as man’s inhumanity to man had converted him to his doctrine of non-violence? Or was it just his feeling of revulsion against his fellow-Indians, men like Shafi, the Brigadier and Gian Talwar, that had made his spirit curdle? (268)

And further,

He did not know the answer; the rights and wrongs were so inextricably mixed up; but he was conscious of some great change that had come over himself. He felt weak, like someone waiting for outside guidance…. (268)
The theme of revenge and betrayal go hand in hand in the novel along with the historical events forming the backdrop. Another story that runs parallel to Gian and Debi’s story is that of Debi’s sister Sundari. Sundari, who is a docile but intelligent and educated girl, half in love with her own brother, marries Gopal Chandidar as per her parents’ wish. The Chandidars belonged to one of the thirty-seven premier families, and Gopal was the nephew of the Maharani of Begwad. He was said to have been educated in England and had a well-paid job with a British firm. After their marriage they go to live in Bombay. Sundari is betrayed by her husband, Gopal, who makes love to the society woman Malini within full view of his newly-wedded wife, thus causing one of the most dreadful and most unforgivable betrayals in the book. It is in Bombay that Sundari and Gian come across each other for a second time. The first time they had met in Duriabad where Debi had invited him for a picnic. The second time when they meet in Bombay, Sundari is attracted towards Gian. She feels a sense of gratitude towards Gian for having helped and ‘befriended’ Debi and also she is on the look out for a lover to involve him in her game of ‘revenge’ she is planning to have on her husband. But by this time Gian has come to realize the falsehood of his existence and it is his true love for Sundari that makes him see all this. He is now a morally regenerated individual. He walks away from the sexual pleasures and demands from Sundari a fuller life based on true love. It is in fact interesting to watch the growth of Gian’s character from a youth of confused idealism to a murderer, informer and liar, struggling for sheer survival and finally to a responsible man trying to gain self-respect and some decency in life. All this gives him the courage to reveal the truth to Sundari who spurns him for his falsehood and leaves Bombay to be with her parents in Duriabad during the days of turmoil of the Partition.
Debi Dayal, after his disillusionment with the Japanese, comes out of his hiding from the Silent Hill in the North East once the War is over. He, now, is looking for Shafi Usman and is eager to have his revenge on him. He visits a fellow revolutionary, Basu, in Calcutta who leads him to Shafi in the brothels of Lahore. Debi, whom we see a changed man during his days of hiding, is prepared to listen to Shafi’s version of the betrayal. But, once again, Shafi blinded by communal hatred, double-crosses him. Debi’s desire for revenge is rekindled and this time he takes away Shafi’s love, Mumtaz, from him. He buys the girl from the brothel owner for a sum of rupees ten thousand. Once out in the street, he tells the girl to go wherever she wants. Mumtaz is aghast to know that Debi bought her only as a part of revenge he had planned and refuses to leave his side as she has nowhere to go. She pleads him to accept her as his servant — that she would cook for him, press his limbs, do anything he wishes her to do. Finally, Debi takes her to Kernal, rents a house on a dairy farm. Debi’s casual commitment to Mumtaz turns out to be an act of destiny. He gets inextricably involved with her. His sense of responsibility towards Mumtaz turns into love for her and this once again brings him back to the folds of life which he had deliberately renounced. He meets his sister in Bombay and wishes to be reconciled to his parents.

All along the novel there has been a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to compare and contrast his two protagonists, Gian and Debi Dayal. Initially, in the very beginning, Gian is shown to be a follower of Gandhi. His faith in non-violence is genuinely felt although a bit confused and it breaks when put to a severe test. Debi has, with all due irreverence to the ideals of truth and non-violence, deliberately cultivated the cult of violence as a means of achieving the noble end of throwing the British out of
India. In the Cellular Jail also, Debi is steady and unchanged in his self-image, his convictions, his high idealism and is forever planning to escape from the island in order to fulfil his mission of life. On the other hand, Gian has no intention of leaving the islands and thinks of permanently settling down in this place, own a piece of land, get married, raise a family and live a life of plenty. We visualize a sharp contrast in the attitude of both the characters be it towards life or violence. But in the later stages of the novel, both show something in common, confusion in their view towards violence. Both Gian and Debi, regardless of their earlier states of mind, are submerged in the flood of violence that runs through the country. G.S. Amur rightly points out this point-counterpoint analysis of the two characters in the following words:

Gian and Debi Dayal, with contrasting natures and contrasting ways, reach the same goal and discover the same value, the value of love. But unlike Gian, Debi Dayal is not permitted to live. Though he has given up violence, violence claims him as its victim and he falls on the very day that brought freedom to the two countries. It is a terrible death that comes to Debi Dayal but the affirmation at the end is as real as the terror and Debi’s surrender to death is also his surrender to the protective power of love. (Amur 112)

Debi, who is on his way to Duriabad along with his love, Mumtaz, to reach out to his parents and sister in the days of violence caused in the wake of partition of India, is taken off the train by angry, violent mob and despite Mumtaz’s repeated protests and claims that he is her husband, Karim Khan, the mob turns a deaf ear to all her pleas. They ruthlessly slaughter men and women whom they are suspicious of being Hindus and
Debi, unfortunately, is one of them. The coincidence of Debi meeting his doom on the day of freedom is vividly described through the imagery of the rising sun in the novel, “... through the gap he saw that the sun had just risen. That was the last thing he ever saw: the rising sun in the land of the five rivers on the day of their freedom” (369).

Gian, too, leaves the safety of Bombay to help Sundari’s stranded family in Duriabad which is now a part of Pakistan. It is here that Gian realizes the value and power of love, the power to transform the weakest of individuals into a good human being. Faced by the contemptuous criticism of Sundari, he reasons out the change in him:

‘Since we are talking about my degradation, may I tell you that that is partly the reason why I have come,’ Gian said, ‘to try and prove, if only to myself, that there can be some good in the weakest of human beings…. Don’t you see I am trying to make up?’ (351-52)

He decides to stay with the family and take them safely to India along with a convoy of other Hindu refugees. Meanwhile, all the friends of the family have refused to help them, even the police refuse to provide them with security and the faithful servants have also fled. In the middle of the night, Shafi and his men come to the Kerwad House and attempt to molest Sundari and her mother, Radha. They attack her father and injure him. Gian comes to their rescue and in a scuffle that ensues between him and Shafi, Sundari’s mother is shot. Sundari in a fit of rage repeatedly hits Shafi with the idol of Lord Shiva and kills him. In the morning, Gian, Sundari and her father leave for the convoy in a car, leaving behind her dead mother. Tekchand is not able to bear the grief and goes back to the deserted house to be with his dead wife. Gian and Sundari leave
Duriabad forever, “moving with antlike precision towards the part of India that was to remain India” (380).

A creative writing does not become Indian simply because of expressions borrowed from Indian languages. It has to be a veritable account of Indian life with all its aspirations, hopes and frustrations. Malgonkar is one such novelist who has shown a keen awareness of Indian tradition and its hoary history. Though the actual scenes of partition occur almost at the end of the novel, the writer effectively paints the panorama of life in India in all its vividness. The placid life in a Punjab town, the sylvan rolling fields of Gian’s ancestral village in the hills, the wild and primitive conditions at the cellular jail on the island in Andaman, the life styles of the rich in Bombay have been truthfully recorded in the novel. The extended metaphor of Lord Shiva, the God of destruction, right from the first chapter to the last, is in true sense representative of Indian religion and philosophy. The novel has violence and betrayal as one of its theme yet the principles of truth and non-violence which form the core of Indian philosophy have been highlighted and endorsed at the end of the novel. The characters in the novel realize the fruitlessness and inefficacy of violence; and truth and love emerge victorious. His characters also justify his narrative style. His leading characters in the novel are all Indians but they are also representatives of the society they move in. The rural characters have a rustic touch and lack the fineness of the nuances of language. On the other hand the English of the urban characters has spontaneity to it. All this is an indicator of the fact that Manohar Malgonkar’s ‘Indianness’ can hardly be questioned. He is able to justify the use of the language and the themes of the novel echo the age-old tradition of Indian values and customs.
Of the novels of Chaman Nahal, *Azadi* and *The Crown and the Loincloth* are predominantly political and deal with the recent history of our country. Nahal in his monumental novel, *Azadi*, presents a great historical event in terms of its full human implications seen and felt through the lives of a few individuals. A moving saga of the division of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan and the accompanying disaster that hit these two newly-declared independent countries in 1947 forms the backdrop of the novel. He refers to such details from recent Indian history as the Champaran Agitation of 1917, the 1929 Congress Session at Lahore, the Quit India Movement of 1942, the arrival of Wavell as Viceroy, the Simla Conference of 1945, the British Cabinet Mission of 1947, the arrival of Lord Mountbatten as Viceroy and the Radcliffe Boundary Commission. The greater focus, though, is on one family, the family of Lala Kanshi Ram. Here again the author singles out two characters — father and son for acting as the centres of consciousness. They are Lala Kanshi Ram and Arun. It is they who represent the two major points of view in the novel and it is the interaction between each of these two characters and the events which brings out the inner tension between diverse points of view and raises a number of socio-moral, ethical and human questions. Though all the characters in the novel experience the same traumatic effects of a cataclysmical event marked by brutality, violence, bloodshed, mass murder and rape, it is the varying reactions of Lala Kanshi Ram and Arun to these happenings, which becomes the centre of interest in the novel.

The plot of the novel is structurally speaking symmetrical and well organized. The novel is neatly divided in three parts entitled The Lull, The Storm and The Aftermath — all suggestive and symbolic of the three distinct stages in the narrative. ‘The Lull’
describes the peace and communal harmony among the people of Sialkot before the idea of partition captures the imagination of some Muslim zealots. The novel opens on June 3, 1947 with the most important historical event of the century, the announcement of the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan and ends with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on January 30, 1948. Azadi, thus deals with eight tumultuous months in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Interspersed in the novel are references to the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, Quit India Movement, the Cripps Mission, the Radcliffe Boundary Commission, the Interim Government with Nehru as Prime Minister and the Sikh demand that the river Chenab should be the boundary between India and Pakistan. There are frequent references to Gandhi’s offer to Jinnah for a homeland for Muslims within an independent India itself. Azadi clearly deals with a momentous period of our history.

Lala Kanshi Ram, a wholesale grain merchant of Sialkot, whose life is restricted to the small circle of his own business with his happy interactions with his family and neighbours, looks deeply worried about the announcement that the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, is to make on June 3, 1947. His interest in politics is skin-deep and his only deviation from routine business is to attend the meetings of the local Arya Samaj. He is mild mannered and has always pulled on well with his Muslim friends; in fact his dearest friend is a Muslim, Chaudhry Barkat Ali. The ill-fated announcement comes, and people listen to the news with bated breath. Lala Kanshi Ram has lived in Sialkot for years, has prospered there and is unwilling to leave even after the partition is announced. An Arya Samajist to the core, at one stage the thought of converting himself to Islam crosses his mind, so great is the compulsion to stay on in his native town. In the Muslim dominated
city of Sialkot, which was until a few days ago a picture of peace and amity and cooperation among the Muslims and the Hindus and the Sikhs, all being the children of the same soil, the Muslims celebrate the news of partition and the creation of Pakistan with the bursting of crackers and illuminations and processions. Their jubilation is in sharp contrast to the eerie silence that prevails in the Hindu localities. The people of Punjab in general and of Sialkot in particular who were until then only Punjabis and who “spoke a common tongue, wore identical clothes, and responded to the weather, to the heat and the first rains, in an identical manner” (Nahal 54) suddenly become conscious of their religious and ethnic roots, of their being Hindus or Muslims, of their belonging to the majority or minority communities. In their own turn, the Hindus and the Sikhs think only of how to defend themselves from the impending attacks of the frenzied and fanatical mobs of Muslims. Lala Kanshi Ram, who has been an ardent admirer of the British and their just rule, now begins to feel the pinch, as now; he like the other Hindus would have to leave his land of birth. S. C. Bhatta, in his review of Azadi, points out:

His (Lala Kanshi Ram) attitude towards the British Raj is marked with an element of ambiguity. He is on the one hand moved by the patriotic exhortations to free the country. Yet he likes the pageants and processions and the safety of the British Raj.” (qtd in Dhawan 132-33)

He does not foresee the horrible dimensions which Hindu-Muslim hostility is destined to take on in the weeks ahead. The situation in Sialkot worsens, and events take place at monstrous rapidity and suddenness. Hence he is utterly shocked and dismayed by the events that follow and the dreadful reality of his having to leave his homeland comes to
him as a most mortifying blow. With the influx of the Muslims into the city, crying hoarse their tales of woe and destruction at the hands of Hindus on the other side of the border, communal tension mounts up in Sialkot.

Lala Kanshi Ram’s wife, Prabha Rani, is a good woman of decent taste, and though she is not educated, not literate even, she is mightily conscious of her domestic obligations and is religiously devoted to her husband. Arun, a shy, pimply youth of twenty is the son of Lala Kanshi Ram and Prabha Rani. He has grown up on the soil of this very city and studies at the local Murray College. He reads and plays; goes to pictures, to his friends’, at times to his father’s shop too, and is completely free in mind and spirit. His closest friend in Sialkot is Chaudhry Barkat Ali’s son, Munir Ahmad, in whose company he likes to discuss sundry topics with Bill Davidson at the Cantonment, and with whose sister, Nur (Nur-ul-Nisar), he is ardently in love. In the usual course of events, in spite of their differing religions, Arun and Nur might have got united in marriage, but with the outbreak of communal violence everything goes topsy-turvy. In this sickening climate of communal bitterness and hatred even the pure and profound Arun-Nur love relationship ceases to be a private, personal affair, and, almost in spite of them, it comes to acquire communal or political overtones. And such close and devoted friends as Arun and Munir too feel “a tension towards each other” (124). The love story of Arun and Nur narrated through the consciousness of Arun brings the effect of the present-in-the-past, by bringing their life to a closer focus. The reader becomes emotionally involved in the narration and like Arun we become fully aware of the doom of the partition which threatens to bring partition in their love life too. The narration reaches the height of tragedy with an increasing element of pathos: “Will I ever see you
again? God alone knows why people are so full of hate. I wish they were not to part souls that love each other. But I’ll think of you till the day of my death” (266). Their tragedy is only one of many instances of the partition not having spared even innocent people. The impulses and reactions of Arun to the changing fortunes are brought out through the technique of reminiscence and nostalgia. Chaman Nahal uses this technique to make the historical past present to the readers.

Other characters of the novel include Bibi Amar Vati, thin and ugly, foul-mouthed and quarrelsome. She owns the house in which Lala Kanshi Ram and other families live as tenants. Bibi Amar Vati’s husband Gangu Mull and her son Suraj Prakash are the two good-for-nothing fellows in the novel. Suraj Prakash’s wife Sunanda Bala, is rather a “whimsical woman, so proud and aloof” (149) “soft and delicate and very exquisite and reserved” (152), there is a pronounced kind of stubbornness and dignity and assurance in her demeanour, and she does indeed look regal. There is Padmini, a widow and a charwoman. She works as a maid-servant in several households, including those of Bibi Amar Vati and Lala Kanshi Ram. A “faded beauty of a very delicate type” (74) in her early forties, she does not feel “repressed by her position as a domestic servant” (227). When Lala Kanshi Ram and others leave Sialkot and reach Amritsar and then decide to go to Delhi, Padmini stays on at Amritsar in her desperate search for her missing daughter, Chandni. In her own turn, Chandni is a young, quiet and healthy girl in her teens, beautiful and desirable in spite of her poverty and dark complexion. Another tenant of Bibi Amar Vati is Isher Kaur, a beautiful young woman, married to Niranjan Singh. She is expecting her first child soon. Her husband is a volatile person, strong and
determined, a fanatical Sikh, who immolates himself at the Sialkot refugee camp for the sake of Dharma. Isher Kaur’s father, Sardar Teja Singh, too, lives with her.

The whole town of Sialkot, which had remained free from the brutalization of masses, unlike bigger towns like Lahore, Multan, Amritsar and Jalandhar, ultimately is engulfed by communal conflagration. The Muslim refugees who have come from East Punjab, have their own tragic tales to tell with the result that even in Sialkot, in spite of age-old cordiality between all communities, a killing spree begins. Chaudhry Barkat Ali, a secular person though, minces no words when he prompts Kanshi Ram to leave his home in Sialkot and tells him categorically:

…every day hundreds of refugees from India continue to arrive with tales of terror and disgust. Whatever is happening here in Sialkot, things very much like that are happening on the other side too…let’s make no mistake about it….When refugees of personal misfortunes land here, the politicians use them to their advantage to fan up further hatred. (140)

What were at first only sporadic acts of murder and arson subsequently explode into massive and organized violence by the Muslims in the city of Sialkot. A sizeable majority of the Hindu families shift to the newly set up refugee camp for safety, and those residing in Bibi Amar Vati’s two houses on the Fort Street do also move there on August 2, 1947, under Lala Kanshi Ram’s leadership. Lala Kanshi Ram is helped by his friend Chaudhry Barkat Ali and a British sergeant, Billy Davidson who lived in the barracks near the Hurrah Parade Ground and was a friend of Arun. Though an Englishman, Davidson was a very reasonable man who liked India and felt that the
British rule was a great injustice to India. He had always been against imperialism and foreign possessions. He also knew what his people had done in Malaya and Africa before he came to India. “Local cultures had been destroyed everywhere. More so, in India which had such a long history and tradition” (117). After the announcement of Partition, Davidson commented: “If you ask me, I think this is the most stupid, most damaging, most negative development in the history of the freedom struggle here. And this time it is we who are pushing things” (122). He was highly critical of Lord Mountbatten, “You may sing songs in honour of Mountbatten…but he has duped you into a division of the country. Even Gandhi and Nehru failed to hold their balance before him — Jinnah I never counted for much. They have fallen for a handy prize…” (123).

In the town of Sialkot, even when Hindus and Sikhs are escorted to refugee camps, they are attacked and looted. Lala Kanshi Ram’s shop is plundered and what shocks him most is that one of the culprits is none other than Abdul Ghani whom he had helped on a number of occasions. Life in the camps is simply unbearable. Hindus and Sikhs wait for other convoys to come before they can leave for India. What comes, however, are trains full of dead bodies. In one of the attacks on trains Kanshi Ram’s daughter Madhu and her husband are killed and he cannot even get their bodies. He sends his son Arun in search of their bodies but Arun is horrified at the death-like silence at the railway yard. Nahal describes this ghastly scene as seen by one from close quarters:

The dead had been removed from the train and dumped there without sentiment or concern. It so happened many of them had their arms around each other or they were holding each other with their legs. And in the disintegration the fire brought
to them, there was a constant movement in the heaps. Arms were climbing up or they were sliding down. Legs were yielding their hold or they were burying themselves deeper. And the eyes of one skull seemed to look into the eyes of another and send unspoken messages. For the other skull would nod, in a way saying it had quite understood. (184)

Arun recollects the past life with Madhu Bala with a sense of fondness and nostalgic longing. She had been to him more than a sister. She was a friend, a companion, one who had led him to the threshold of adult life. He fondly recalls how the presence of Madhu in the house was a perpetual source of joy and her presence had radiated the entire household. Madhu’s death not only jolts the sensibility of Arun but also sets off the intensity of the sufferings undergone by Lala Kanshi Ram and his wife. From these refugee camps the foot convoy, including Lala Kanshi Ram, his wife, Prabha Rani, and their son, Arun; Padmini and her daughter, Chandni; Bibi Amar Vati, her son, Suraj Prakash, and daughter-in-law, Sunanda Bala, and their children, Bhavna and Nava Kant; Sardar Teja Singh and his daughter, Isher Kaur, and thousands and thousands of others, leave Sialkot for Dera Baba Nanak on September 24, 1947. It passes through Gunna Kalan, Pasrur, Qila Sobha Singh, Manjoke and Narowal.

A new dimension is added to the novel at this juncture with the author introducing the drama of love and romance between Arun and Chandni, the daughter of the charwoman, Padmini. The drama is heightened in intensity by the sad and pathetic ending of this affair. Arun, who had lost Nur in the wake of the partition and his sister, Madhu, as a result of the violence instigated by the partition of the country, had become frustrated
and disillusioned. It is his search for identity and self-realisation that draws him to Chandni. It is through Chandni that Arun is able to find a new identity for himself, “an identity which had partly been thrust upon him by the surge of events, and which partly he had worked out for himself metaphysically. He did not want to give that identity up” (233). Though the author at times points to the fact that it is actually lust that draws Arun to Chandni but then at the same time it might also be “interpreted as a sad commentary on the disastro us effects produced by a great cataclysmal event like the partition which brought about a disintegration of all stability and balance not only at the physical and material levels but also at the mental and emotional levels” (Dhawan 135). The Arun-Chandni affair infuses a new life for them among the dismal surroundings of the camp. Arun reveals his intention to marry Chandni to his mother.

Nahal adroitly presents the continuity of life in the most adverse circumstances in the refugee camps. In spite of the hard times in these camps, life had settled to a “not too unpleasant routine… children were born each day and a number of people closed the chapters of their lives and passed away” (243). Sardar Jodha Singh, father of Sardar Teja Singh and grandfather of Isher Kaur too passed away after a brief illness. But this was not the only tragedy that awaited the family. The Sikhs were going through the worst kind of ordeal and it was believed that the only way for a Sikh to reach India safely was by shaving off his hair. Sardar Jodha Singh had been advising Teja Singh and Niranjan Singh to do so but Niranjan Singh remained adamant. Finally, under a lot of pressure from Isher Kaur, he agreed to cut his hair. But one night instead of cutting his hair he sets himself on fire. He, thus became a martyr for the people of his faith.
On their way from Sialkot to Qila Sobha Singh and then from Qila Sobha Singh to Narowal, the foot convoy was twice attacked by the Muslim mob yet the convoy moved on to Narowal where they were to be joined by other convoys coming from different areas. Two things happened to Arun at Narowal. He killed a man and he lost Chandni for good. Arun killed Captain Rahmat Ullah Khan whom Arun knew from his college days and who was attached to their convoy for safely depositing them at Dera Baba Nanak. Captain Khan abducted Sunanda in the wake of a mob attack on the camp and tried to outrage the modesty of Sunanda. He took her to a secluded godown but failed in his attempts when Arun reached the spot and killed him. When both of them return to the camp in the morning, they are told that Chandni had been forcibly taken away by the Muslim marauders. So, the Arun-Chandni affair meets its tragic end at Narowal. Sunanda also loses her husband Suraj Prakash. Despite all this the convoy, like life, moves on to Dera Baba Nanak. Lala Kanshi Ram’s emotional outburst on reaching the Indian border is described beautifully by Dhawan:

Lala Kanshi Ram undertakes the long-drawn and arduous trek from Sialkot to Dera Baba Nanak on the Indian border without any complaint or pronounced feeling of pain. Throughout this journey he keeps on talking of Sialkot, but the moment he crosses over to India he shouts *Vande Mataram* and kisses the earth of this country with tears in his eyes. (Dhawan 124)

From Dera Baba Nanak, Lala Kanshi Ram’s family moved to Amritsar and from here to Delhi but to his utter surprise Lala Kanshi Ram realizes that they are welcome nowhere. They have been turned into “wandering gypsies” (321). On the train from
Amritsar to Delhi, Isher Kaur delivers her baby. She gives birth to a daughter. Settling in Delhi also becomes an ordeal for Lala Kanshi Ram. The first ordeal is his meeting with the Rehabilitation Officer who leaves no stone unturned to humiliate and debase him. Finally, the officer scribbles the word ‘Kingsway Camp’ on his papers. Sardar Teja Singh and Isher Kaur are picked up by one of their distant relatives who takes them home with him. Now, Lala Kanshi Ram has to take care of Prabha Rani, Arun, Bibi Amar Vati, Sunanda and her children. Lala Kansh Ram tries his level best to find a house on rent in Delhi but everywhere he is meted out with one or other kind of humiliation. Finally, they move to Kingsway Camp on Alipur Road and to their pleasant surprise they were not housed in tents here but in hastily raised hutments. They acquire two adjacent rooms. One is occupied by Lala Kanshi Ram’s family and the other by Bibi Amar Vati’s family.

The novel ends with the news of the death of Mahatma Gandhi and the realization of the “loss of identity”. Lala Kanshi Ram becomes painfully conscious of the fact that freedom or Azadi has been achieved at the cost of enormous sufferings and hardships to people. His “loss of identity” and dignity is represented by the following act of his:

It hurt Lala Kanshi Ram no end. From the time he set up this little shop, he had stopped wearing a turban. A turban was a sign of respect, of dignity. He had no dignity left. He now wore a forage cap. Or he sat bare-headed, advertising his humble position to the world. (366)

Azadi, thus, can be interpreted as a plea for the realization and assertion of identity in a world that is cruel enough to push people into the oblivion of anonymity. But
instead of getting defeated Lala Kanshi Ram gains a heroic endurance. K.S. Ramamurti sums up this attainment of endurance in the following words:

He learns to transcend a narrow ideal of communal harmony and his mind is now ruled by pity, compassion and love. The hardships that he faces to find accommodation in Delhi increase his moral responsibilities, and his sorrow over the death of Gandhi is deep and penetrating. His individual consciousness has in the end matured and developed into a national consciousness, rather a purely humanistic consciousness. (qtd in Dhawan 133)

Tolerance and sacrifice which stand on the principle of non-violence are the essentials of Indianness. Partition fiction in English and in English translation on the one hand records man’s bestiality and savagery and on the other, the vast volume of it underlines that man is essentially sincere, committed to upholding humanity to survive and sustain itself. In partition fiction, some characters indeed stand for universal goodness which the Indian tradition underlines. The unique feature of Chaman Nahal’s Azadi is that it is wide-ranging in presenting the multifarious views of life through different characters and situations. The experience of the protagonist, Lala Kanshi Ram’s life enables him to see life with a compassionate and humane understanding and thus helps him attain a cosmic vision of life. The nobility and strength of Kanshi Ram Lala’s mind makes him an epical character. In one sense, he represents human understanding, tolerance and wisdom which are synonyms of Indianness. The main strength of Azadi apart from a firm faith in the essential goodness of human beings, is, a close understanding of the Punjabi ethos and culture which the author portrays intimately and
profoundly. For Punjabis, more than the loss of life and property, the partition meant a loss of identity. *Azadi* comes to terms with this crisis of identity. The novel deals with the Indian life, culture and social problems of Indian milieu. The themes, the viewpoints and the style of the author are purely Indian. The regard for the past is another way of expressing the sense of ‘Indianness’ which is conveyed by a faithful representation of one’s culture and traditions. Nahal faithfully records the essence of the culture, festivals, customs, religion, costumes, language of the period. All this brings him into the category of those writers who do an extensive research on the subject and theme they wish to depict. His creative fictional world is truly Indian in spirit and imagination exuding the flavour of the country and the region he writes about. Thus *Azadi* can be regarded as a realization of ‘Indianness’.
Works cited:


