Chapter V

Satyāgrahī and Satyagrāhī
The Crown and the Loincloth
And
The Salt of Life
I

Quite a few Indian English novelists have written historical novels. However, only half-hearted or fragmentary attempts have been made. K.A. Abbas’s *Inquilab* is more a documentary than creative fiction; Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* is confined to the 1930-32 period; Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* tries to cover too much in too little space; and R. K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* only touches on the theme. Chaman Nahal is the only novelist who has written four novels – a quartet – based on some of the most important events in the history of India. As is well known, the historical novel is a form of fictional narrative which reconstructs history and recreates it imaginatively. In such a novel both historical personages and fictional characters appear. Though writing fiction, a good historical novelist researches his chosen period thoroughly and strives for verisimilitude. An excellent example of a historical novelist in English is Sir Walter Scott, who made excellent use of historical personages and events as the backdrop of his plots. Chaman Nahal, when he wrote his four historical novels, had an advantage: Born in 1927, he had at least an indirect experience of the events described in the first three novels of the Gandhi Quartet and a real experience of the Partition, the major event in *Azadi*. Referring to *The Crown and the Loincloth*, Rama Jha says, “Nahal’s novel is actually born of a personal urge, emanating almost from the experience to understand the whole
meaning of the series of happenings that eventually led to India’s independence accompanied by India’s partition.”¹

Nahal uses the historical events only as a framework on which are based the lives of many ordinary men and women. Like many other writers of historical novels, Chaman Nahal is not interested in history per se: “History...became for me the new myth — or a metaphor, which is my understanding of myth.”² Making use of the most gripping movements in India’s struggle for freedom,

... Nahal has created a poignant human drama with a sure instinct for dynamic character and intense action. The *Gandhi Quartet* is a remarkable fictional venture in the history of Indo-Anglian novel in which the author has admirably succeeded in effecting clear-cut linkages between the historical personages and fictional characters.³

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar expresses a similar view when he says,

In a historical novel-sequence like *The Gandhi Quartet*, while the facts and dates of history are doubtless there as the base plank and the reassuring background, the fictional part is equally important. The *Quartet* is Gandhi’s story, India’s story; and it is also Kusum’s story.⁴

What attracts the reader’s attention is the way Nahal “portrays” the character of Gandhi in the Quartet. As P. Usha Rani observes,
Nahal’s twofold fictional objective in The Quartet is: to portray Gandhi and all he lived and stood for, including inevitably his role in the nation’s freedom struggle, as a major character, not the protagonist; secondly, to delineate Gandhi’s relationship to the masses of people and his impact on them, and the reaction and responses of his followers, associates, critics and adversaries to the phenomenon he became.\(^5\)

Gandhi is not presented as a super-human hero, but as a human being, as an “ordinary” individual: “For the first time in Indian fiction, Gandhi is presented as a frail human being, troubled by doubts; he wonders whether people are ready to accept his methods, whether what he did is right.”\(^6\) If he has many positive qualities for people to emulate, he has a few negative qualities also. While he is known for his humility, foresight, pragmatism, uncanny perception, love and affection for everyone, and patience and forbearance, many people are unaware of his inconsistencies, misconceptions, enigmas, and failures.

II

*The Crown and the Loincloth* is set against the backdrop of the turbulent times of 1915 to 1922. It begins at the time when Gandhi had finally returned from South Africa to India at the instance of Gokhale and launched his crusade against the British rule. In Indian history, it covers
the tremulous first phase of the struggle for independence. As the title “The Crown and the Loincloth” clearly suggests, the theme of the novel is confrontation between seemingly unequal forces: the mighty British Empire, the “Crown,” and the newly-awakened India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the “loincloth.” As B. P. Lamba points out,

While Larry Collins dealt with the freedom fight in a very journalistic manner in his *Freedom at Midnight*, Chaman Nahal has perceived this from a more passionate and intensely realized angle. It differs from the ordinary run of novels insofar as it deals with that age which saw just the beginning of the stirrings that were to reverberate all over the world – the period between 1915 and 1922.7

As the novel *The Crown and the Loincloth* begins, we find that the death of a young girl in a South African prison troubles Gandhi, so does the gulf between him and his children. As he travels in a ship, Gandhi recollects some of the incidents that not only made him unhappy but also doubt the validity of his own decisions. He remembers how Kasturbai expressed unhappiness at his experiments: “How many vows will you take and how long will you go on torturing yourself? ... You drive yourself too hard, and it hurts me” (14). Gandhi asks himself the question whether what he did was a denial of nature and answers, “On the surface, maybe. Yet he was actually going beyond nature; he was adapting nature to the
needs of the human soul. Not denying it but restructuring it. Carrying it along with him to new heights and dimensions” (15). An interesting point is that Chaman Nahal uses Gandhi’s first name, Mohandas, in the first few pages of the novel maybe because the novelist wants the reader to consider Gandhi as an individual in relation to his family and society and not as a national hero.

Chaman Nahal employs an innovative narrative technique, making use of “apparitions,” to present the various facets of Gandhi’s personality. In the first vision Gandhi sees two young girls who were inmates of his Tolstoy Farm, “whom he had punished for being indiscreet with boys on the farm” (16). They are joined by two women who received similar punishment from him. Their charge against him is that he does not know much about human nature: “You don’t know much about human nature, Bapu, do you?” (16). In the next vision we find Gandhi’s first son, Harilal, pointing an accusing finger at Gandhi. Harilal also expresses the view that Gandhi does not know anything about human nature:

‘You are not a man but a monster,’ said Harilal, raising an accusing finger. ‘Not a man but a monster.’

‘Don’t forget I’m your father!’ said Mohandas, taken aback.

‘No, I don’t forget that. It is you who have forgotten that I’m your son.’

‘How can you say that?’
'Look at the record. You made the simple job of living so complicated for me. No, for all of us – for my other brothers and for my mother as well.'

'Speak for yourself.'

'All right. Did you ever give me any love? Did you send me to school? Did you give me any money to spend? Or new clothes at the festival time? Did you leave me alone? You were ever showering me with questions. Wanting to know if I had been disciplined enough. If I had been good. What I had done during the day. What good I had done. So I went and did some good for you – for a change!'

'You drank wine, you went after women, you abused your religion. You call that being good?'

'But you forget – as usual. You drove me to it.' And he added with contempt: 'When will you learn a little about human nature, Bapuji?' (Emphasis added) (17)

The next vision shows the spirit of Gandhi's dead elder brother, Laxmidas, expressing his unhappiness at not being helped in the last days of his life when he was in need of money. When Gandhi tells him that he had given away all his assets for public need, Laxmidas says,

‘Public needs – public needs! Who sent you to England to read, the public or me? Who sent you those sweets and food
parcels from India? Who paid for the Bond Street suits you insisted on wearing? Who paid for the dance and the violin lessons? Not the public, but me, me, me. And when I get old and need help from you, you disown me, what?’ (18)

Gandhi begs his brother to pardon him. What we notice here is how an individual is able to detach himself from his family in order to serve society. For Gandhi the entire world is his family of which his own family is only a part. We have here an individual who sacrifices himself and his family for the benefit of society. As Usha Rani observes, “It was for him an ethical question of choosing between the greater good of public duty and the lesser private obligation. Necessarily he felt that he had to sacrifice the latter.”8 Gandhi says to his brother,

‘I’m guilty, brother. Yet, believe me, I don’t feel guilty. If I were given the choice, I’ll do the same over again. There came a stage when all my other duties fell away and only one remained – towards the lowly. I know you needed help, but the mass of people I threw my lot with, needed even more. It is difficult to explain this to you. But can’t you at least forgive your Moniya?’ (18)

As an answer to his question whether anyone came to him out of faith, Gandhi finds Hermann Kallenbach telling him, in another vision, “I came to you out of faith” (19). He tells Gandhi how he derived peace and
solace in his presence. Gandhi remembers their conversation about the great Buddha and what he said about a great soul: “I would say he became a monk to live for others,” and added, “Yes, for others. That’s the highest good, the only good man can do – that he has the privilege to do. An animal lives only for himself. A man, in order to be a man, must live for others” (21). The next person to appear in Gandhi’s vision is Mir Alam, who had struck him down when he was addressing a meeting of Indians in a mosque. When everybody wanted Gandhi to proceed against him, Gandhi refused to do so. This incident brought a great change in Mir Alam, who says, “What brought me to you and made me follow you was your humility” (23). In the next vision we find Valliamma telling Gandhi, “Bapu …. I died for you in faith” (24). Though Gandhi was shocked at her death, he also felt encouraged in that her death “represented the dawn of a new awakening” among Indian women in South Africa who “joined their men to fight for their rights” (24).

The passages quoted above are clear indication that Gandhi is fighting a grim battle with himself. It is rightly pointed out that “Nahal’s invocation of Gandhi’s hallucinations of his life in South Africa is a master-stroke and a necessary prelude to the kind of character Gandhi is going to emerge in the story.” Thus, the episode of the hallucinations serves two purposes: It presents Gandhi the man and also Gandhi the national leader to be.
However, Gandhi, as he reaches the shores of India, is haunted by doubts about whether he has chosen the right path and whether he will be able to lead the people of India in their struggle for freedom. He comes to the conclusion that a unique instrument of welding the masses is self-denial. He experimented with satyagraha in South Africa and now he wants to use it in India against the mighty British Empire:

Moral right was the only answer to moral wrong. Satyagraha was the term he coined for it – truth-force. And he was soon going to test it out on a much wider scale. In South Africa, too, the victory was significant. The actual gains were minor but in terms of honour won and dignity restored they were tremendous. Now he had the whole of India to play his role in. Much bigger issues were involved, much bigger forces; it also involved a bigger effort on his part. (38)

Thus, as Usha Rani rightly observes,

The image of Gandhi, as it emerges from his own lengthy and painfully honest self-examination and the authorial report based on certain well-known facts, is that of a person who is essentially human in his hopes and aspirations, dreams and nightmares, temptations and weaknesses, doubts and misgivings, always in a turmoil, trying to master himself.10
Like Moorthy in Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, we have in this novel Sunil, who has a very strong faith in Gandhian principles. However, though he seems to be the protagonist in the novel, his wife, Kusum, is the most important character not only in this novel, but also in the entire Quartet, except in *Azadi*. Referring to the character of Kusum, Chaman Nahal mentions, in his *Silent Life*, “the remarkable power our women enjoyed in their households,” and says,

…I wanted to make it as a structural centre of the story. So I decided to have no hero in my novel, only a heroine. My Gandhi novels would be built around a central female figure only who would operate in them all. Husbands or lovers in her life would come and go but she herself would be there throughout….The theme character of the novel, in view of my intention of making a woman hold the stage, came to be Kusum.11

In this context we are reminded of Nahal’s views as expressed in his “Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations”:

Now I examine how well feminism has been presented and how replacement models are possible within the Indian context in my survey of Indian writing in English. I am sorry to say our older writers whom we may call the first generation of Indian English Writing – R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk
Raj Anand – missed out on great opportunity. They had freedom struggle and so many women in it to write about. They have bypassed our freedom movement which is a matter of surprise to some of us. … In the freedom movement from 1915 to 1947, we had the most riot period in the Indian history when Indian women played such a glorious role: Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu. For instance, when Gandhiji was arrested in the Salt Satyagraha which he was leading, it was Sarojini Naidu who led the Satyagrahis. So the historic role played by Indian women in their own capacity definitely provides an alternative replacement model. This rich resource has been completely left out.

The only man writer I can think of in addition to myself who talked of women’s role is Bhabani Bhattacharya.12

(Emphasis added)

At the family level, in the novel, Thakur Shanti Nath represents the Crown, and Sunil, his youngest son, represents the Loincloth. In other words, Sunil is the Gandhi at the family/village level: “In The Crown and the Loincloth, the novelist succeeds in weaving the story of Gandhi and that of Sunil and his family, giving equal importance to both. They merge quite naturally, without being yoked together by violence.”13 The Thakur is a typical village patriarch, who is respected and feared by his family and
the residents of Ajitha. He is proud of his family and also loves the villagers. This benign patriarch is an admirer of the British rulers. However, he has an opponent in his own family: Sunil, his youngest son. One reason why Sunil takes the side of the freedom fighters may be because he has had college education, though much against the will of his father. He is attracted to Gandhi’s ideals even before he meets him personally:

He had carefully read Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* and every word of it had gone home to him. Organized violence and organized non-violence were both forms of strength, were both feats of endurance and courage. Only organized non-violence was a greater force, a greater power…. (67)

In fact, the novel has all the three views of Indians about the British rule: Shanti Nath in favour of the British rule, Sunil in favour of non-violent methods for achieving freedom, and Rakesh, Sunil’s colleague and friend, in favour of violence as a means to end the British rule. Everyone considers Rakesh an anarchist: “He proclaimed loudly enough that the British could be driven out of India only by force. He said Gandhi was a fool who was not taking the people forward but backwards. What would going to jail achieve – or fasting?” (63). When Celia Ashby asks him what he wants Shyama, his wife, to be, Rakesh says, “A rebel. Walking shoulder to shoulder with me, with a gun in hand” (206).
In Sunil’s view Gandhi’s influence on the people of India is nothing less than a miracle:

‘A miracle has come to pass, Kusum, a miracle,’ he burst out, at last.

‘What miracle?’

‘Do you know what a hartal is?’

‘Sure I know what a hartal is – it is a strike!’

…

‘…Combine Gandhiji with a hartal, and you have a hartal the like of which you have never known or heard of….’ (54-55)

Just as Gandhi tries to lead his people on the path of non-violence to freedom, Sunil hopes to “lead these men [of his village] in a different direction one day” (62).

In his Introduction to *Kanthapura*, C.D. Narasimhaiah says,

The impact of Gandhi on our villages was the impact of a dynamic religion through one of its supreme practitioners; of idealism and a sense of purpose and urgency on a people who had virtually ceased to live, with resignation writ large on their faces. It was Gandhi’s greatness that he produced hundreds of little Gandhis throughout the country.14

Like Moorthy in *Kanthapura*, we have in this novel Sunil as a “little Gandhi.” Chaman Nahal presents national events and family events taking
place parallel to each other. Two significant events, one at the national level and one at the family level, make Sunil seek Gandhi’s guidance and advice. While the Jallianwala Bagh massacre hurts the nation, the elopement of Rakesh with Shyama, Sunil’s younger sister, hurts the family. Sunil becomes a victim of both national tragedy and domestic tragedy. The latter incident shocks Sunil so much that “He seemed to have lost all bearing, all sense of self, all illumination” (134). He seems to find a solution when “in December that year, he stumbled upon Gandhi” (134) and “saw a new path opening before him” (135).

Sunil tells Gandhi about the recent incidents in his life and his frank confession of not being able to help his sister endears him to Gandhi, who always wants people to tell the truth:

Sunil also told him about Shyama. That endeared him to Gandhi – when he blamed himself for not having been able to help his sister. If he couldn’t help his sister he saw no hope for himself helping the motherland, Sunil continued. That further endeared him to Gandhi. For Gandhi politics was inseparable from morality, personal morality. The pursuit of God for him was the pursuit of truth, and that truth started at the individual level. Gandhi liked Sunil. (139)

During the course of their conversation, Sunil assures Gandhi that he is prepared to give up his parents and his rich living in order to serve the
motherland and Gandhi. Sunil’s life takes a new turn when he meets Gandhi the next day. We also notice how resolute Sunil is in his actions. Gandhi tells Sunil,

‘… when I’m asking you to learn spinning, I’m really asking you to learn a new language. A language that might touch the chord of an Indian peasant everywhere – in any corner of India. And once they follow you in spinning, they will follow you in everything, including politics. Now they know nothing about what an empire is and what we are fighting for. Then they will understand all the subtle mysteries of this intricate game, this intricate deception that the British are playing on us.’ (143)

As suggested by Gandhi, Sunil quits his job as a teacher and starts in his village “the first of the khadi bhandars, stores devoted to homespun cotton material, that were soon to dot the map of India” (144-145). This sacrifice of Sunil’s – his leaving his job in order to popularize khadi and thus help Indians break the shackles of the Western influence – can be compared to Gandhi’s sacrificing his flourishing practice in order to help the suppressed regain their dignity. When Kusum expresses doubts about the wisdom of his decision, he reminds her of what he told her on an earlier occasion: “I said I would take these men in a different direction one day, didn’t I?” (146). When she says that it is against dharma to be disloyal to
his father by taking away his labourers, Sunil firmly says, “Lesser loyalty must give way to a greater one, so says our dharma. And our greatest loyalty is to the motherland” (146).

Many of the Thakur’s day labourers shift their loyalty to Sunil. Kusum, initially a little hesitant, gets used to the new life and proves to be a true companion to Sunil. In fact, she inspires many women to join their group, and women who join them outnumber men. In the meantime, the Thakur receives yet another shock when his second son, Sukhbir, embraces Sikhism. Thus there is a revolt against the patriarch, Thakur Shanti Nath, in three different ways: Sunil representing the non-cooperation movement and achieving freedom through peaceful means; Shyama, with her husband Rakesh, representing the view that extremism is the right way to drive the British out of India; Sukhbir also representing, by his joining by Akhalis, the view that the British should be forced out of the country.

When Sunil moves to a new house, he finds that it is surrounded by many houses occupied by Muslims, many of whom become members of his group. It is here that Sunil meets Rehana, wife of Muzaffar Ahmad, a teacher and poet. Rehana and Sunil are attracted to each other. Sunil experiences a strange feeling whenever he thinks of Rehana: “...at the very thought of Rehana the rhythm of his body accelerated and he longed to be with her” (159). However Sunil has two reasons to push Rehana out of his mind. First,
Anything that was good according to the *Gita* was good, and vice versa. Love was not even mentioned in the *Gita*. But duty was, chapter after chapter. And Sunil’s duty demanded acceptance of Kusum. Sunil *had* accepted Kusum – as his family wanted. He even had affection for her, which he liked to refer to as love. No, he had not digressed from the path of his religion. (158-159)

The second reason is that “his obligation to the motherland demanded that” (159). The two passages quoted prove that for an Indian religious and social obligations are not different but are so closely related to each other that one cannot be considered without a reference to the other. In spite of his best efforts, their relationship becomes more intense during their stay in Bombay, where they go to attend a conference of the khadi bhandar workers. The following conversation between Sunil and Rehana shows that though Sunil is for spiritual love, Rehana tries to convince him that true love includes the body:

‘Why can’t two persons desire each other without hurting convention? Why can’t there be roohani love between us, spiritual love?’

... 

Sure enough, Sunil sat up.
'Yes, spiritual love is nobler, too. The flesh only defiles and drags us down.'

'I didn’t mean that. For me roohani love includes the body. I don’t regard the flesh as impure...'

Rehana seems to be a very complex character. She and Sunil spend a few intimate hours in the sea, yet she does not allow him to go beyond a point, perhaps a point of no return. Her love cannot be called platonic in that she does believe in physical love and yet is afraid of the social and religious norms that prohibit one from such affairs. She believes that God “didn’t punish you for desiring; he punished you for indulging in a desire” (172). When she tries to convince Sunil that “consummation is the death of an experience” (173), Sunil in his turn tries to convince her that “Consummation is the fortification of an experience” (173). However, Rehana sticks to her view when she says, “Wrong, all wrong. It is the death. You will never desire me as passionately once you have had me” (173). According to Rama Jha, “In the typical Gandhian sublimation of their passion for each other, Rehana and Sunil vindicate Gandhian morality in which love for the cause of national freedom overpowers that of the mere personal.” However, critics who express this view seem to have overlooked the fact that the novel presents Sunil not as an ideal hero but as an ordinary human being with both strengths and weaknesses. For that
matter even Gandhi, especially in the first chapter, is not presented as a super hero but as one who has to try hard to put his principles into practice.

Sunil and Muzaffar are imprisoned for two months for demonstrating against the Duke of Connaught. Sunil gradually drifts away from Kusum as physical separation leads to emotional separation. It becomes worse day by day. On Gandhi’s direction, Sunil goes to Simla Hills to support plantation workers in their struggle against the exploiting timber merchants. This reminds us of what Gandhi did in South Africa and in Champaran to settle the dispute between the British planters and the peasants. Sunil’s visit to Simla Hills gives him an opportunity to run away from Kusum and Rehana: “When he looked at Kusum he saw sleuths of Rehana in her, and when he looked at Rehana he saw sleuths of Kusum” (221). The miserable plight of the plantation workers provides to him an opportunity to have a glimpse of the real India. Though Sunil succeeds in bringing the two factions to the negotiating table and helping them reach an honourable accord, he is shocked at the cancer that afflicts Indian society, untouchability. He writes a letter to Gandhi about this blur on Hinduism to which Gandhi replies, “…think of yourself as an untouchable and befriend these lonely children of God. If they won’t let you live in their midst out of fear, why not bring one of them to live with you?” (236). As suggested by Gandhi, Sunil picks up Chandra and makes him his cook and companion. If we compare Sunil with Moorthy in Kanthapura, we
can notice that the former has greater conviction than the latter. Whereas Sunil invites an untouchable to his house, Moorthy has a feeling of guilt about entering the house of an untouchable, and “taking the Ganges water he feels a fresher breath flowing through him, and lest anyone should ask about this new adventure, he goes to the riverside after dinner to sit and think and pry.”

Sunil realizes that the poor oppressed sections of India cannot understand the true significance of political freedom and the need for achieving economic freedom. He comes to know that what is immediately required is liberating the common man from the shackles of poverty, disease, illiteracy, superstition:

Their souls were buried in the earth under their soles, and they had to be resurrected before they could have a sense of the soul-force. If they could keep themselves clean, if they could earn their daily bread with dignity, if they could look upon each other with respect – those would be achievements enough for them. (264)

Sunil, therefore, decides to devote his energies to social service instead of leading a political struggle against the British rule. However, Sunil cannot free himself from his physical desires. In Priti, a tribal girl, he finds a woman who can satisfy his physical desires. And, the reason for his decision to return to Ajitha is the telegram that he receives from Rehana:
More than anything else, more than the freedom movement, more than the uplift of the outcastes, more than the healing mission he had set his mind on, more than any of his other commitments or ambitions, above all his aspirations and goals, above all his worldly possessions put together, what he wanted was to see Rehana, to see her again with his own eyes — to see her and feel her nearness. (263)

An interesting point to note here is that Sunil seems to have conquered his emotional self but not his physical self. His relationship with Priti becomes so intense that both Kusum and Rehana disappear from his thoughts. Hence one cannot agree with the view that “Inadvertently he enters into a sexual liaison with Priti, the tempestuous hill woman.” But when once he decides to go back to Ajitha, he drops Priti like a hot brick. Maybe Sunil is not as loyal to his women as he is to his country.

In the meanwhile Rehana is arrested and imprisoned in BareilIy. Just before she is released, Sunil leaves for Ajitha. Sunil, Kusum, and Muzaffar meet Rehana after her release. They go to Nainital to spend a few days. It is here that Kusum begins to suspect a relationship between Sunil and Rehana. Though at first she is angry with both Sunil and Rehana, she gradually realizes that it is Sunil who is to be blamed for the relationship. In fact Kusum develops a soft corner for Rehana:
Kusum had to agree there was a touch of innocence, a petulance about Rehana, which was enviable. That softened her towards her. It was Sunil who was to be blamed, it was he who was fickle. Every gesture, every mood, every movement of his was studded with guile. If in the face of that Rehana could manage a poise, manage a gracious smile, manage myths and stories, then she was either deadly wicked or a sinless victim. Kusum was coming to believe she was the latter. (289)

The passage quoted above affirms the character of Kusum as a woman who can understand women and their emotional needs. However, she can never pardon Sunil for his transgression. Rehana seems to reciprocate Kusum’s love for her when she makes up her mind to go out of Sunil’s life. Perhaps for Rehana the only way to detach herself from the imbroglio is to detach herself from this world. That is why she welcomes death by water when she is caught in a heavy downpour. She gets caught in a quake and landslide and is drowned in the rising waters of the lake.

Thus Rehana dies the way she wanted to die: “Rehana would now be in that lake forever. Exactly as she wanted. Just as she wanted” (339). One can say that Rehana’s inviting death is her interpretation of the concept of satyagraha; she does not want to hurt anyone and so brings death on herself. Thus, as Usha Rani rightly observes, all the major
characters “acquire perspectives of the situations they find themselves in according to their attitude to satyagraha.”

Sunil is presented in the novel not as a perfect human being but as an ordinary erring and suffering man with quite a few vices and imperfections. But he realizes his moral lapse and repents for it. He seeks Kusum’s forgiveness by his single-minded devotion to her. He tells Kenneth, “I have mismanaged everything. My professional life, my politics, my personal life” (425).

The next major event in the novel is the attempt by the revolutionaries to assassinate the Prince of Wales. It is Sunil, a freedom fighter, who saves the Prince from the attack and, in the process, is killed. This is perhaps the best example of satyagraha in that a satyagrahi is against violence even if it is against his own enemy. Sunil, through his sacrifice, makes an affirmation of his faith in satyagraha and also his faith in the basic human qualities of love and sacrifice. Thus a satyāgrahi (“satyaagrahi”) (one who practises “truth-force”) becomes a satyagrāhi (“satyagraaahi”) (one who grasps the truth). As B. S. Goyal says,

The central meaning and vision of the novel lie in Sunil’s quest for love and affirmation. He runs the whole gamut of experience, from the dutiful and wifely love of Kusum to the spiritually stirring and maddening love of Rehana to the intensely physical and passionate love with Priti. He finds
some sort of meaning emerging from his endeavours for social emancipation of the untouchables, his commitment to the spinning wheel and his attempts at preserving the unity of workers against their exploiters.¹⁹

Sunil’s death shocks Kusum. But she is against the ceremonies being performed at her in-laws and does not participate in them. She thinks that such ceremonies help people pretend sorrow but do not signify a genuine sense of loss. Kusum also makes an affirmation of her love and faith when she decides to join Gandhi’s ashram. She asserts her independence of spirit by deciding not to lead the life of an ordinary Hindu widow and thus heralds the arrival of the new woman in Indian society. Rama Jha observes, “It is ironical that Kusum affirms Gandhism, though it is Gandhi who has brought upheavals in her life.”²⁰ Kusum recalls, “Affirmation, said Sunil, was the coining of a new mantra to fight despair and it struck Kusum that her declaration of faith should perhaps centre round the very symbol that had brought about that upheaval in her life” (407). Kusum’s momentous decision to join the ashram, with her son, Vikram, signifies her decision to sublimate her sorrow by serving the motherland. Thus she makes an affirmation of her faith in Gandhian ideals of service and sacrifice: “... the grand affirmation of martyrdom by Sunil is matched, after his tragic death, by Kusum’s similar affirmation at Sabarmati, her dying to her old life and being reborn to the new ....”²¹
To conclude, *The Crown and the Loincloth* explores the theme of affirmation of human qualities of love, affection, faith, and sacrifice.

III

*The Salt of Life* begins on a negative note, both at the national level, represented by Gandhi, and at the level of the individual, by Kusum. It is 1929 and Gandhi is overcome by a sense of defeat because most of his principles and programmes are being neglected by his followers and many Indians are still going in for foreign goods. Added to these the relations between Hindus and Muslims have worsened and untouchability is still rampant in India. At the individual level there is a reference to the relationship between Kusum and Raja Vishal Chand though no name is mentioned:

He [Gandhi] had built a temple, a mandir, at his Sabarmati Ashram, and recently a young widow, whom Gandhi thought to be chaste and pure, had been caught inside that temple with a young man of the ashram. They would sleep together in the innermost part of the shrine right before the eyes of the Lord so to speak. (13)

Gandhi’s reaction to this relationship shows that he is a changed man now; his anger is not against the individuals involved but against the religion they belong to, Hinduism:
An incident of this kind would have sent Gandhi into the most dismal self-pity in the past and he would have inflicted endless torture on himself, as though he were to be blamed for the remiss. Now, he heard it and only shook his head. No, this land was beyond reprieve. Especially its religion, the religion of the majority of its people. It was a sore, a wound, an abrasion, this religion. (13-14)

Gandhi wants to find a new vocabulary to channelize the anger of the people properly as it happened in the earlier case (in *The Crown and the Loincloth*) when he successfully spread the language of spinning. But at the same time he feels diffident because he is haunted by a sense of being “a colossal failure, a nonsuccess, a nonfulfiller, a mass of flesh filled with errors, omissions, misconceptions and blunders, he was nothing but a monumental hoax” (43). To get out of this torture, Gandhi wants to seek the advice of Kusum, whom he considers a “model of virtue”:

This woman from the Punjab had been Gandhi’s model of virtue, continence and forbearance for the last seven years. When she had first appeared at Sabarmati after the death of her husband, she looked so sullen, even belligerent. Yet soon enough she had adjusted herself to the routine of the ashram. That was a quality of the Punjabis Gandhi admired the most – their resilience. (26)
Gandhi was arrested by the British the very day of Kusum’s arrival,

... but even in those brief moments, the young woman had

stirred him. She was in deep sorrow, deep confusion. There

was no time to hear her story, but Gandhi knew of the sorrow

of a whole nation, so he could sympathize. (26)

By the time Gandhi is released from prison, Kusum

... had attached herself to the ashram school and altogether

altered its scope. Along with the routine themes, she had

introduced areas such as carpentry, clay-modelling, tailoring,

painting and music. Charkha of course was a compulsory

subject and each student did his daily quota of spinning. She

also took students out to the fields for agricultural work. Now

why hadn’t Gandhi thought of that? This is what the children

of India needed today. Kusum called it Basic Education, and

Gandhi readily adopted her phrase. (Emphasis added) (27)

Chaman Nahal considers himself one of the few men writers who
talk about the significance of woman’s role in society. The passage quoted
above shows how a “common” woman seems to know better than a great
leader about the education Indian boys and girls require. In this context
one is reminded of the well-known proverb “If you educate a man, you
educate an individual; if you educate a woman, you educate a family.”

Thus, as Syamala Narayan observes, “Kusum is one of the most
memorable characters in fiction, who carries in her all the vitality and power of womanhood. She is a complex personality, not cast in a simple Sita, or Savitri image." Whereas Gandhi seems to be more interested in spiritual development, Kusum seems to focus on social and economic development. However, it does not mean that Chaman Nahal denies Gandhi what he is known to be great for. For instance, even Kusum cannot suppress her appreciation of the great man:

Kusum was ever diffident in speaking freely to Gandhi. He had taken her husband away from her, he had taken her family away, he had taken the Punjab away; he was in the process of taking her son away from her. Yet there was a certain magic about him which she could not decipher nor disown. Even her native intelligence was baffled by his power, by his irrational power. He simply looked at people, addressed a few words to them, and they were dying to do his bidding. (30)

Chaman Nahal tries to project, through the classroom incident, that great men get great ideas from even not very significant incidents. When Gandhi goes to Kusum’s class to discuss with her whether there is any way to get out of the present imbroglio, he finds Kusum giving her students a lesson on metals and minerals and how salt is made. She promises her students that one day they will all march to the sea and make salt. Then, in a flash, it occurs to Gandhi that he should launch salt satyagraha as part of
the fight for freedom. Thus he is able to find the new vocabulary he has been searching for to reach out to the masses and make them actively participate in the protest against the British rule. He tells Kusum, “I’ll launch a salt agitation. The boy with the running nose and you, Kusum, have been my redeemers” (emphasis added) (45). He announces to Kusum, “I’ll be walking to the seashore and I won’t return to Sabarmati until India’s freedom is won” (47). He invites Kusum to join the agitation, but her response shocks him when she says faintly, “I too am leaving Sabarmati Ashram Bapu….for good. I too won’t be coming back to it” (49-50). For Gandhi “…this was not surprise. This was stupefaction”; Gandhi’s “face fell, his mouth swung open, his eyes refused to flicker behind the thick glasses” (50). When Gandhi asks her in a very weak voice why she wants to leave the ashram, she says, “I have just slept with a man, Bapu” (50). This statement of Kusum’s is a manifestation of the turmoil she is undergoing, torn as she is between her duty to the nation and her dehadharma(duty to the body):

Had she been, in these years of asceticism and withdrawal, only deceiving herself? Was her dedication to work, her esoteric readings, her metaphysical debates, only an alibi for not facing up to her more urgent longings? A faint colour spread on her cheeks as she thought how another man had partaken of what had been the exclusive domain of only one
so far. Yet even this brought no remorse with it, no blame. Rather it brought a relief, a restoration of femininity and dignity. The seed in her had sprouted again, the woman in her had sprouted again. The Raja Sahib might or might not marry her; it was inconsequential. She sat satiated in the worship that had been offered at her feet. (86)

The man Kusum refers to is Raja Vishal Chand, ruler of Lambini, a small princely state near Jammu:

He was not an emotional man. He had led such a meagre, frugal existence. Yes, he was the Raja of a small state but he did not cherish anything that was acquired by inheritance; you looked more a usurper. He would gladly part with his inheritance if only he knew where to dump the burden.

Though a usurper, he was not an unworthy usurper. (87)

Unlike most princes, Vishal Chand is for reforms, freedom, and support for the leadership of Gandhi. He is a teetotaler and attends Gandhi’s prayer meetings whenever he is in Sabarmati, where he met Kusum and fell in love with her. He is thus an embodiment of all the qualities that Gandhi wants everyone to develop in himself/herself. That he develops a relationship with Kusum shows him to be a man true to himself and not a hypocrite who would, with great difficulty, suppress such feelings and cause harm to both his body and his mind.
Gandhi thinks that people like Kusum and Vishal Chand want “to have revenge, to spring a surprise, to shock him – to score against him” though “he had got used to infidelities, adulteries, excesses of the flesh” (91). Kusum’s response to Gandhi’s charge reiterates her view that for a human being both the body and the soul are equally important and it is almost impossible to classify all things into right and wrong or good and bad; many a time one merges into the other. She says to Gandhi, “... For you things are divided into a cast-iron right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice. Actual life is far more complex than that. Sexuality too has its nobility – which you won’t see” (92). Kusum does not consider her relationship with Vishal Chand transgression: “The human female was God’s finest and ultimate act of creation….when she yielded, submitted herself totally to a man, to a cause, to an idea, her shoulders bent and resilient in her yielding, in all that she was voicing her modesty only” (103).

Without delay Gandhi gets their marriage solemnized. An interesting point one can notice here is that while Gandhi seems to give importance to the form of a relationship, Kusum gives importance to the meaning of a relationship, which is proved by the fact that her marriage is “a simple ceremony, performed in the school compound” (92). As Usha Rani rightly observes, “His[Gandhi’s] confused reaction to Kusum’s seeking fulfilment in the love of Vishal Chand is that of an ordinary
disappointed human being and has in it little of the Mahatma or the unchallenged leader of the masses.”

Vikram is as much shocked as Gandhi when he comes to know about the relationship:

Vikram went into a sullen coma on hearing of the news. Why hadn’t his mother told him of it earlier? Why hadn’t she discussed this with him? Bapu didn’t look too pleased, had she taken his approval before embarking upon it? She had complacently disowned his father. She may as complacently disown him as well. The child remained poised on nettles and thorns. (92)

He refuses to go with his mother to Vishal Chand’s place. He demonstrates his satyagraha when he tells her,

‘I won’t be going with you to that bungalow, mother,’.... ‘I will stay on in the ashram only.’

...

‘...you dragged me from Ajitha to Ahmedabad. Now you want to drag me again. I was too little then. But I must have resented it. I am older now. I have grown up. I have grown-up feelings. I know what’s happening.’ (92)

Gandhi seems to have a premonition of Kusum’s future and therefore decides to take care of Vikram. He thinks that Kusum is
deviating from the safe and secure path. However Kusum is not happy
with her son’s decision and Gandhi’s support for it:

Kusum worried about Vikram. Anyone growing up at the
ashram couldn’t help being queer. Gandhi was so demanding
and there was a strength, a convincing rationality, in his
demands. Yet he placed the same hardness on small children
as on adults. Fear gripped her heart when she watched
Vikram’s downcast face sometimes. She was hoping to take
him away from these hectic activities. Yet she was too
drained out to offer resistance, and smiled feebly. (93)

Gandhi’s thoughts when Kusum is about to leave show him as a man
who feels dejected because he thinks that his principles have been
thoroughly defeated. He is, in fact, furious with Kusum but cannot express
it to her:

Gandhi was used to surprises but this was too much. It was
like a lemon tree, which had been tendered and nursed in the
hope of additional lemons, coming on to produce figs – bitter
and unsavoury figs. It was like a lioness giving birth to
piglets. It was like a hive producing cactus instead of honey.
It was like some unhealthy draught coming out of the udder of
a cow instead of milk. Kusum had altogether turned a
monstrosity. (93)
Through this passage the narrator seems to suggest that even great men, who fight for equality and fraternity, are themselves not free from animosity when it comes to personal relationships.

After their honeymoon at Travancore, Kusum and Vishal Chand go to Lambini. Kusum, after years of ascetic denial, begins to experience an idyllic existence far from the madding crowd. She does not think of her past and indulge in self-pity nor does she feel it necessary to think about her future; she is confined to the present happiness.

Vikram joins Gandhi in the march to Dandi. In the meanwhile Kusum visits her parents to see her mother, who has been very ill. She feels very unhappy about the hostility between her mother, Veeran Vati, and her father, Lala Dharm Das. They are poles apart in their attitude to life. While for her father wealth is everything, for her mother it is evil.

The news of Gandhi’s arrest reaches Kusum in Wazirabad. She is shocked to know that Vikram has been injured and is lying unconscious in a hospital. She suddenly realizes that in her thirst for worldly pleasures, she has failed as a mother:

So finally and absolutely had Kusum broken with Gandhi when she married Vishal the idea never struck her; now she knew that’s exactly what she wanted to do. She had neglected Vikram; she had taken no note of his hurts. What if Vikram needed her as much as she needed Vishal? In going to Vishal,
she had not only indicated an option, she had indicated a rejection. She had also acknowledged the existence of preferential loves....she should not only go and see Vikram, she should persuade him to come over with her to Lambini.

(258)

The passage quoted above suggests that Kusum has not only rejected Gandhi but also Gandhism in her craving for worldly pleasures. Her mind is so disturbed at hearing about her son's condition that she involves herself in a quarrel with Percy Wand, a British political service officer. This incident gives the reader a hint that Kusum is once again moving, though a little slowly, towards Gandhism:

She was wrong when she thought she had broken with Gandhi. Who could sever a bond so elaborate and convincing? Yet it went deeper than Gandhi; it was the spirit in her that could not be broken, or beaten, or bent – under any circumstance. Yes, slowly she was getting to know herself – what she was, what she wanted. (275)

Kusum is sure that “Gandhi would approve of...woman as shakti” (277). She is now “no longer Kusum, no longer a woman, she was all the women mankind had ever known or was likely to know, she was an embodiment, a typefication, an exemplification of womanhood” (277). This event gets
such publicity that it reaches Gandhi also and in his view it is “yet another act of satyagraha” (275).

After visiting her son, Kusum returns to Lambini. She feels unhappy that Vikram has chosen to go back to the ashram after recovering from injuries. There is another sad event in Kusum’s life when she has a miscarriage. She writes to Gandhi, “I have been cheated once again, life appears to have no logic” (338). Gandhi replies, “Life might appear to have no logic; yet it had an inherent logic of its own” (338).

When Gandhi goes to England in 1931, for the Round Table Conference, he takes Kusum with him since Kasturbai is unwell. When Kusum observes the reception Gandhi receives at Lancashire, she seems to regret her mistake of leaving the ashram and wants to take an active role in the Gandhian movement: “If the women of Lancashire – the women Gandhi had thrown out of jobs because of his campaign against the British-made material – could offer him smiles and welcome, surely she whose whole life was wound up with him should offer more” (425). However,

...Gandhi was even more jealous a master than a lover, and in the case of married couples actively participating in the movement he insisted on a vow of celibacy. That kind of loyalty Kusum felt she could hardly offer Gandhi, knowing her passion for Vishal. And then, as though to enforce her
point, she became pregnant again and in due course Amit was born. (425)

Kusum decides to pay a visit to Sevagram near Wardha. However she defers her journey because she is in the company of her two sons, Vikram and Amit. Vikram has come to Lambini for the installation of Amit as the new ruler of Lambini: “At Sevagram, Vikram would be lost in the political storm Gandhi was ever unleashing. The boy was already lost to her; he was more the son of Gandhi” (483).

Kusum gets the second shock of her life when she receives the news about the death of her second husband, Raja Vishal Chand:

This man, so unprepossessing, so unheroic, who had made no special declarations to her, placed at her feet no special laurels, had made her happier than any sovereign could have. (482)

The passage quoted disproves the view that what Kusum wanted was physical pleasure. Her marriage with Vishal Chand was not just a coming together of two bodies but also of two souls.

At Sevagram, Kusum is hurt that Gandhi has not referred to her personal loss and consoled her: “She wanted relief now and this Gandhi, who talked mouthfuls of carrying the burden of the whole nation on his shoulders, didn’t have the time to offer that shoulder to someone so close at hand!” (485). Her referring to Gandhi as “this Gandhi” shows how angry
she is with Gandhi. She cannot control her sorrow though she knows that
“There was absolutely no place for self-pity in the Gandhi ashram” (486).
Then she realizes that “she was living through a monumental era of Indian
history, when the entire course of a nation’s destiny was likely to be
altered” (486) and therefore tells herself, “Cease this restless wandering
which isn’t going to take you anywhere or make you any wiser” (487).
However, when she meets Gandhi and Kasturbai, she says to Gandhi, “I’m
so disillusioned with you” (527). When Gandhi says, “My heart bleeds for
you,” she says, “I sometimes wonder if you have one” (527). Gandhi tells
Kusum, “I know surfeit of suffering can kill a person. But in the
assimilation of that surfeit lies one’s survival. *That salt of life lies in one’s
capacity to endure ceaseless suffering*” (emphasis added) (528). The last
sentence sums up the life of Kusum, who

... was the picture of desolation – abandoned, forlorn,
comfortless, miserable. ... Yet, tired and worn out though she
was, nothing in her seemed deteriorated. There was no decline
in the fibre she was made of. Under the layer of sadness, her
resolve still shone through. Her breath still came out evenly.
Her palms still were steady and firm. Her chin still showed
resolution. (545)
In conclusion, to quote Munideva Rajendra, "While the historical action in the novel, *The Salt of Life*, centres round Gandhi, Kusum dominates the fictional narrative."\(^{24}\)
REFERENCES


