Chapter VI

The Labyrinth of Life

The Triumph of the Tricolour

And

Azadi
The Triumph of the Tricolour covers roughly the period between the Quit India Movement of 1942 and the 1946 elections after which Nehru was sworn in as the head of the interim government. As in the earlier two novels of the Quartet, in this novel also we find the story of Gandhi and the story of the members of Thakur Shanti Nath’s family skillfully interwoven. Kusum, the widowed wife of the Thakur’s fourth son, Sunil Kumar, became a widow a second time when her husband, Raja Vishal Chand died. She and Vikram, her son by her first husband, are close associates of Gandhi. In contrast, Amit, Kusum’s son by her second husband, is a revolutionary and dislikes Gandhi and his principles. However, Amit’s attitude changes a little towards the end of the novel.

The novel begins with an account of Gandhi’s concern for India:

Where exactly did India stand in this expanding world view, thought Gandhi. A nation of four hundred million people was still a slave nation, which couldn’t raise its head in its own right. It had no national flag which could flutter alongside the flags of others nations; it had no national anthem which could be sung alongside theirs….Must the poor and the humble ever continue to be squashed and stomped? Gandhi pondered and pondered as he tossed in his bed at night. (13-14)
Gandhi realizes that it is high time the Congress launched yet another mass movement. He tours the entire country and comes to the conclusion that neither Hindus nor Muslims want separation, which view is proved wrong later. When in 1942 the Congress passes the “Quit India” resolution, there are many agitations resulting in bloodshed.

The political turbulence prevalent all over the country provides the backdrop to the story of Thakur Shanti Nath’s family. Naval, son of Sukhbir, second son of Shanti Nath, is attracted to revolutionary life and joins the Himmat, a revolutionary organization:

Naval soon teamed up with Joseph Daniel and his Himmat.

Joseph had seen them browsing through socialist literature at a local library; he had seen them reading Gorky and Prem Chand. Why not live lives they were only reading about? There was a far greater thrill in that; reality in contemporary India was a thousand times stranger than fiction. Naval liked this talk and joined the Himmat – fell further from grace in Thakur Shanti Nath’s eyes. (34)

Gyan Thakur is the second grandson of Shanti Nath and younger brother of Naval. He joins the Indian Navy and thus “instantly rose in Thakur Shanti Nath’s eyes. Government service meant security, meant honour, meant respectability” (34-35). Gyan is “a little petulant, a little too assertive” (35). These qualities of his lead to his untimely death. A petty
quarrel with the British officers results in a minor mutiny: “...we are commandeering the ship....We have suffered these bastards for far too long. We’ll teach them a lesson” (45). However, soon the Indians are overpowered and “Ten Indian sailors died in that snap fighting. Gyan was one of them....All the ten sailors were tied to posts at the Gateway and left for the crowds to see who indeed was in command here” (48-49). We find that Sunil sacrifices his life in his attempt to save the British Prince from being attacked by Indians, while Gyan, his nephew, sacrifices his life in an armed rebellion against the British. Thus two members of Thakur Shanti Nath’s family lay down their lives in the cause of the nation.

In the meantime Kusum decides to make her home in Banaras:

The sense of widowhood slowly caught up with her. What had she to do with politics, with the freedom of India, or with raising children? Amit was being well looked after in Lambini; Vikram had not needed her for a long while now. And children in any case grew up, even those who had lost both their parents. But her two dead husbands stared her in the face and, apart from vaguely reminding her of her own mortality, they reminded her of her continued obligation to them – even though they were dead, *because* that they were dead. (50)
She seems to experience a sense of guilt about not observing the prescribed rituals when her husbands died:

Once all this had seemed stupid and trivial to Kusum; she was young, she was impatient, she wanted to abridge the formal and hurry on. At forty-four, she was no longer in a hurry – what hurry and for whom? Vikram and Amit could fend for themselves but who would light the portals on the lonely journey on which Sunil and Vishal were embarked? Except prayer – except prayer. Except ritual – except ritual. And Kusum rented a house in Banaras on the bank of the Ganges and moved there soon after Gandhi’s arrest. She cut her hair short, stored away all her gold ornaments but for a pair of slim bangles, bathed four times a day in the river and immersed herself in worship. Finding no peace at all, none whatsoever – the spirits of Sunil and Vishal might be getting out of it, if anything. (50-51)

The passage quoted above shows the change in Kusum’s attitude not only to life but also to death. When her first husband, Sunil, died she only mechanically took part in the ceremonies. She thought that such ceremonies are not genuine in that people are more interested in performing them as rituals and not as true homage to the departed soul:

“As Thakur Shanti Nath announced that mourning would end on the fourth
The course of the struggle for freedom takes a sudden twist when …for the first time in the freedom struggle the leadership truly passed on to the younger people; the older ones lay languishing in jails. And for the first time in the freedom struggle, the violent and the non-violent revolutionaries truly worked together, in teams, in tandem – Gandhi himself having expressed doubts about the limits of non-violence. (51)

As a consequence, Vikram, a dedicated Gandhian, and Darbara Singh, a veteran revolutionary, join hands. They meet at Sialkot and hatch a plot to highjack a special train taking Italian POWs to Jammu. Vikram associates himself with the Himmat “with just this rider: he shouldn’t be asked to kill” (137). He later says to Joseph Daniel, “…I will not, shall not, cannot, willingly, knowingly, take another man’s life. I have no right to. It is his own precious gift” (139). However, Vikram has another reason for being at Sialkot, his relationship with Julie, daughter of Colonel Michael Fogelson of the Indian Medical Service. Julie represents people who are worst affected by the Quit India Movement because if they have to quit India they have no other home anywhere.
Vikram and Julie met for the first time at Lambini, where she was a student of the school run by Raja Vishal Chand. When they met again in Sialkot, their friendship developed into love. As Usha Rani observes, “The celibacy that he had practiced under Gandhi’s tutelage and training, collapses completely. Julie weans him away from it.”

Vikram seems to enjoy the freedom he has when he is away from the ashram:

He did not know how tough a taskmaster God could be, yet Gandhi was the severest he had known who kept him on his toes until he dropped dead on his bed at night. For Gandhi, it was part of the upbringing of all the youngsters who had come under his fold….so long as they were in the ashram they had to do his bidding. And what a bidding – Vikram shuddered when he thought back on it…. The quaintness of Gandhi reached its apex in the vow of celibacy…. In all other vows, there was some margin for licence. In this there was none: you were supposed to remain celibate forever. (Emphasis added)

When Vikram said, “This was going against nature,” Gandhi replied in anger, “… you are not here to follow nature; you are here to improve on nature” (59). Chaman Nahal seems to suggest through the character of Vikram that “pure living” does not mean exclusion of physical pleasures. When confronted by Julie’s parents, Vikram offers to marry her. Towards
the end of the novel we find Vikram and Kusum as husband and wife. Kusum is an ardent follower of Gandhi but she too dislikes Gandhi’s insistence on the vow of celibacy. She has only pity for her daughter-in-law. Kusum tells Vikram that Julie is depressed, “Ah, my vow of chastity! Is that what’s bothering her!” (435) exclaims Vikram, and adds, “I can’t join him [Gandhi] fully without this sacrifice….when I married Julie I took a brief vacation from the ashram, and my return to it was inevitable. I had clearly mentioned this to Julie. She raised no objection at that time” (435).

Kusum broke with Gandhi when she met Raja Vishal Chand. Kusum says that Julie is not even an Indian woman, “Her physical life is not an illusion or a chimera for her. It is a very essential part of her being” (436). Thus Kusum represents many who found Gandhi’s insistence on the vow of celibacy illogical. She does not like Vikram to be a close associate of Gandhi as she is afraid that he will not have any security. Abha, daughter of Rakesh and Shyama, writes in her diary,

I feel sorry for Kusum mami. She is so upright and firm, has been so throughout, and yet the evenings of her life are so empty. She was with Gandhi herself for so many years. Only now she doesn’t want Vikram to go that way any further. She wants him to have security. And the way of Gandhi is strewn with nettles – a perpetual threat it is. I feel Vikram is right,
though. In perpetual threat alone there lies the challenge of existence. (449)

Julie wonders why Indians are so self-righteous:

Take this celibacy Gandhi was bent on inflicting upon Vikram and her. Physical passion in itself was nothing. She herself could stay away from it, if it came to that – voluntarily. But for Gandhi it was something of a penance. Penance for what? What transgressions had she committed? Why must she accept what was clearly a punishment – when she was altogether blameless. (447)

She doesn’t want to join Vikram in Gandhi’s *padyatra* because she finds Gandhi “too asphyxiating” (448). An interesting point emerges from the different views about Gandhi’s principles. Kusum and Vikram seem to have one step in Gandhi’s ashram and another outside it in the sense that they accept some of his principles and do not accept some. Thus they seem to accept only those principles with which they are comfortable and not those which are inconvenient to observe. On the other hand, both Julie and Abha are firm in their views against Gandhi’s principles.

As the Quit India Movement gathers momentum, an important point the narrator raises is about many humble people – “with no guile, no duplicity in them” (114) – who made India their home. Many artisans,
tailors, bakers, and nurses who want to settle in India as Indians should be welcomed with respect. This is what Kenneth Ashby means when he says, Blame the British and the British Raj for all you want, Mr Gandhi – do ask them to quit....Now, Mr Gandhi, when you are asking the British to quit, who exactly are you saying this to? For surely you can’t include me in this herd. I am not going to quit; I’m going to stay on here, whatever be the nature of India’s government. (114-115)

Chapter three ends with the news about Kasturbai’s death. Gandhi experiences a sense of guilt at the death of his dear wife: “Kasturbai had died only a couple of weeks ago and he was going through an enormous sense of guilt. How hard had he been on her – how much he had demanded of that frail woman!” (116). P. Usha Rani observes,

Looking at Kasturba’s role in The Quartet retrospectively from The Crown onwards, it is clearly borne out that unalloyed love and respect for Gandhi, deep concern for his health and happiness are combined with a courage to speak out her mind when necessary and caution him whenever he goes to excess in self-denial. She resents his chalking out her life for her, and reluctantly accepts many of his vows, including celibacy. She does not hesitate to express her exasperation at Gandhi’s vows....²
Chaman Nahal thus presents the character of Kasturbai as a woman torn between her respect for Gandhi as a leader and her unhappiness with him as her husband. With her strong faith in Indian tradition and culture, she remains a dutiful life partner till her death.

As mentioned earlier, Kusum makes Banaras her home in the hope of finding some solace. She acquires a house close to the river front because she needs a quiet retreat for her prayers. She calls it “Sawera Kunj.” In the name of the house we once again notice Chaman Nahal’s fascination for the dawn, sawera. Kusum finds many destitute women in Banaras. She takes some of them as the inmates of her house. She expresses her anger against her religion when she refers to Banaras as an “unholy city.” She is very unhappy with the way women are treated in India:

Hinduism has no use for the female beyond her functional role. And once this gets fructified, once the female becomes redundant, what do you do with such a burden? You take her to Banaras and leave her there. No, the ritual is not complicated – you don’t need to be too cautious when you are only abandoning someone. The dead man is taken to Harishchandra Ghat, and while he is burning on the pyre and his woman crying her heart out in the sari wrapped around her head, the family just walks away. (165)
Kusum promises her companions that she will never abandon them and, quite interestingly, that her house is not an ashram but their home. She expresses the view that no one, "not even Gandhi," has shown her the right path. In a defiant mood she thinks,

How long would the women continue to be confined here—held captive, held condemned? No, the flag of womanhood, her unsullied purity and power, had to be raised high, and if this could be done only through defiance, so be it. Even Bapu was too smug to see the potential of a woman; he too only punished them. Yet even a wronged woman could work miracles an army of men couldn’t. (168)

Kusum wants to “raise these fiery women who would defy convention—who would defy God” (168). Thus Kusum seems to raise a banner of revolt not against the British but against the selfish attitude of men of her own religion in interpreting scriptures.

A stage comes in Kusum’s life when she is not able to understand what loyalty is. She asks herself why she abandoned Amit and tries to justify her leaving him: “...she had not abandoned him, she was in penitence, in mourning, performing rites for the souls of her dead husbands, and could she offer any atonement without withdrawal, without being self-effacing...?” (177-178). She asks herself the question about the
loyalty of various people in her life and wants to know what exactly loyalty is:

What exactly was loyalty? Devotion, faithfulness, integrity, rectitude, uprightness, sincerity – what? Was sincerity a virtue or a flaw? Wit, humour, spontaneity were surely preferable to sincerity – but what was wit? Ah, how many burdens were placed on the fragile human soul, how many decisions was it called up to make when it could barely breathe! (178)

Kusum cannot escape from her travails and anxieties and a sense of being lonely and unwanted haunts her. Her greatest anxiety is about Amit, whom she thinks she has neglected, albeit unwittingly. One of her visits to Lambini is to take care of the construction of a minar in memory of Raja Vishal Chand. There is also another motive in her visit to her former husband’s place, reclaiming Amit, who has been drifting away from her by joining hands with the tribals in the struggle for independence. He tells her that they have their own way of fighting the British: “…we want to neutralize the enemy. And we will do it without killing. We are really as non-violent as Gandhi. You see, mother, Subhas Bose is on the run and Gandhi is lying idle. So someone has to take the lead” (275).

In the meanwhile Kusum receives the news that the Thakur is dying and she rushes to Ajitha. To her surprise and shock she finds that Ajitha,
once a village, has transformed into a prosperous town as a result of industrialization. Kusum feels that it is “a living rejection of all that Gandhiji stood for in terms of economy and development” (327).

Now that the old man is about to die, differences crop up among the members of his family. Kusum is extremely unhappy that members of the family are more interested in their share of the property than feeling sad at the condition of the Thakur. However, Kusum gets some solace when Vikram, who is also entitled to a share in the property, refuses to accept it. Chaman Nahal seems to present the disintegration of the family as a symbolic representation of what is going to happen at the national level, the Partition of the country.

Vikram remains a true follower of Gandhi till the end. Instead of contesting the elections, he decides to join a *padyatra*, “a village-to-village walk – to calm to communal frenzy” (435). Kusum feels let down when Vikram tells her about his firm decision.

Even after the formation of an interim government, communal violence continues unabated. Gandhi continues his *padyatra*. Kusum, who has been debating in her mind about the sanity of Vikram’s decision, now realizes that no amount of government action can match Gandhi’s tender love:

> Wasn’t there something finer and more precious in what Gandhi was saying? Wasn’t tenderness and love infinitely
more durable than the slap on the face? This old man of seventy-six, who should be resting in a quiet home, was still striving, still struggling, to dispel the gloom of fear. For Gandhi a slap for a slap was no answer. Indeed there was no answer in love either. She had loved so dearly twice in her life and lost. Yet there was a joy in that losing, a gladdening of the heart. Wasn’t Vikram making a more precious choice? (467-468)

As Kusum is enjoying the beauty of the famous monument at Hauz Khas, she is attacked by vultures and she swoons. This attack symbolizes the violence unleashed on the peace-loving people of India. When Kusum regains consciousness, she comes to the conclusion that “the only single truth worth knowing” is “To love without restrictions, without bounds” (476). She decides to join the padyatra.

Thus it is a true triumph of the Tricolour which symbolizes for Gandhi love for fellow human beings irrespective of their caste, community, and gender. However, whether it is a triumph for all Indians remains an unanswered question.

II

Chaman Nahal is best known for his Azadi, which won for him the Sahitaya Akademi Award in 1977. As P. Usha Rani says,
The title *Azadi* obviously refers to Indian freedom and independence. But just as *The Triumph of the Tricolour* raises serious doubts of about the Tricolour’s triumph, *Azadi* even more gravely questions the meaning and significance of the kind of freedom that India wins and the price paid for it. The title of either novel has ironical overtones. It is more bitterly ironical in the case of *Azadi*.3

Critics have expressed different views on the novel. According to M. K. Naik, very few novels on the theme of Partition have done justice to it:

The tragic drama of Partition has inspired three novels, none of which can however claim to have met adequately the challenge of this great theme. Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal dilute the stark realism of their narratives with a strong admixture of conventional romantic love in *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and *Azadi* (1975) respectively; and Malgonkar’s patent inability to look beyond the sheer horror and brutality of it all in *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) allows an intended epic to dwindle into a melodrama.4

On the other hand, according to N. Radhakrishnan, *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal is refreshingly different in tone and execution from any one of the novels on partition. There is, for the first time in Indo-Anglian fiction, a novel that presents
a mature and well-balanced view of the holocaust. It is a mature work of art devoid of sentimentalism and melodrama.⁵

K.C. Belliappa observes, “Where Chaman Nahal achieves a comprehensiveness of vision is the manner in which he demonstrates the havoc that Partition played on the people of the country both at the social and the individual level.”⁶

The epigraph is a passage from Rabindranth Tagore’s Gitanjali. The last two line of the passage are:

Into that heaven of freedom, my
Father, let my country awake.

The “heaven of freedom” becomes a haven for self-interested leaders. Azadi effectively brings out this irony which is at the root of the novel:

Jinnah and Liaqat Ali Khan were coming into an estate; as was Nehru, why else would they rush into azadi at this pace – an azadi which would ruin the land and destroy its unity. For the creation of Pakistan solved nothing. (81)

In O. P. Mathur’s words,

This stupendous drama of history – the way it affects the lives and felling of a few individuals – is the framework of the novel. But its real subject is man – his hopes and fears, his loves and hates, the eternal pull of God and the Devil in him.⁷
In other words, Chaman Nahal’s concerns in Azadi are not only the socio-economic and humanistic implications of the tragic exodus of suffering millions from the lands of their birth but also the deep psychic disturbances and emotional transformations brought about by the traumatic experience of the Partition in the inner lives of individual men and women. Nahal unfolds his theme through the consciousness of Lala Kanshi Ram, who is forced to quit his home and dearly-loved place because of the monstrous perversions that erupted in the wake of the Partition. As Lakhmir Singh points out,

Nahal’s purpose is not to depict history but to describe the impact of the historical tragedy of the Partition on ordinary people. Azadi is, in fact, the story of millions of people uprooted from their homes for no fault of their own and this story is symbolized in the person of Lala Kanshi Ram and his family and the pain that they go through during the process of this upheaval in their lives and their alienation from their own home-land.8

Lala Kanshi Ram appears as a minor character in The Salt of Life and The Triumph of Tricolour and as the central character in Azadi. The novel is set in Sialkot in the West Punjab and covers a period of about eight months, from 3 June 1947 to 30 January 1948. It is built around the family of Lala Kanshi Ram, a grain merchant of Sialkot. Interwoven with
it is the story of his son Arun with Chandni (daughter of a charwoman) and Nur, a Muslim girl, transcending distinctions of class, caste, and religion.

As the novel opens, Kanshi Ram looks deeply worried about the announcement that the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, is to make with regard to the freedom to be granted to India and the much talked-about Partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Kanshi Ram is “not too literate….But life had rolled him around, misfortunes come and gone, and this had given an edge to his intelligence” (13). His life is restricted to a small circle of his own business and to his happy interactions with his family and neighbours. He hates the British, and supports the freedom struggle. However,

His 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. Kanshi Ram “hated them [the British] for what they had done to his country and wanted Azadi. Throughout the Second World war, he used to pray they be defeated by the Germans,” but at the same time “deeper down, he also admired the British – in any case he enjoyed the safety of the British Raj and hugged it lovingly. All said and done, the British had brought some kind of peace to this torn land” (17).
Kanshi Ram fears the division of the country. He sees in it the shrewd British plan. His faith in Gandhi’s oath of not accepting the Partition is shaken. When his wife, Prabha Rani, reminds him of Gandhi’s strong stand against partition, he says, “That’s true. But what if there is no other way out? And you know these English, they would rather divide than leave behind a united India” (34). He feels that all his efforts of making a comfortable home for more than twenty-five years will be ruined at the creation of Pakistan: “‘I’ve taken more than quarter of a century to make all this’ – and he made a vague gesture towards the rooms. ‘Everything will be ruined if Pakistan is created’” (34-35). He knows that terror and violence will follow the Partition. He is terribly afraid that “If Pakistan is created, we’ll have to leave. That is, if the Muslims spare our lives!” (36). While the Hindus feel uncertain of their future, the Muslims firmly believe that a separate homeland for them will be definitely created. As the time for the Viceroy’s broadcast approaches, Kanshi Ram becomes more and more tense and anxious. When Lord Mountbatten in English and Jawaharlal Nehru in Hindi announce the partition of the country, “The feelings of the group exploded....They looked at each other and more than regret, more than fear, on the face of each one of them was disbelief” (56). Kanshi Ram’s son shouts, “It’s a betrayal” (57). However, Kanshi Ram clings to his hope that it is possible for Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims to live peacefully as before in Pakistan, though he is not very sure of that: “‘I
suppose we’ll continue here. Why can’t Hindus and Sikhs live in Pakistan? Why should they wish us harm?’ he said, without much conviction” (57). Suddenly people become conscious of their religion and ethnic roots. They are divided into the majority and the minority communities and start hating each other. Sialkot, a Muslim-dominated city, was until a few days ago a place of peace and harmony among the Muslims, the Hindus, and the Sikhs, all being the children of the same soil. But now while the Muslims celebrate the news of the Partition by bursting crackers and carrying out victory rallies, the Hindus and the Sikhs think of how to defend themselves against the impending attacks of the frenzied and fanatical Muslim mobs. Thus a great nation is broken into two on communal basis. As a result, there is “a psychological wedge, an emotional and spiritual rift among the civil, police and military personnel of undivided India. Everything looks so confused, so uncertain, so tense and grim.”10 Soon mobs start looting shops, burning houses; gruesome murders become everyday events. And religion ceases to be a humanizing influence. It creates a strong sense of separation, so that all who belong to another religion become legitimate targets for attack. For instance, before the unfortunate developments there was complete harmony between Abdul Ghani and Lala Kanshi Ram:

…the fact that Ghani was a Muslim and Lala Kanshi Ram a high-caste Hindu never entered their heads. They spoke a
common tongue, wore identical clothes, and responded to the weather, to the heat and the first rains, in an identical manner. If they worshipped different gods, it was in the privacy of their homes, except when Ghani made a spectacle of himself by joining Tazia marches at the time of Muharram once a year and beating his breast in public. But then, didn’t Lala Kanshi Ram make a spectacle of himself too, when he joined other Lalas of the bazaar in throwing colour on others during Holi? No, thought Lala Kanshi Ram, they were not Muslims or Hindus, they were Punjabis – or at least they were till the other day. (46-47)

Thus the “two-nation theory” creates a barrier between man and man, between brother and brother: “Abdul Ghani was no longer friendly with the Hindu businessmen of the bazaar” (48). Though Ghani’s was a small business, his neighbours treated him as an equal, and he had lived in peace with them. But the Muslim League had slowly made him aware of the threat to him in a free Hindu India. It was not a question of his personal views; the League of Jinnah Sahib knew better. They said, view your Hindu neighbour with suspicion, and he did that. They said there should be a Pakistan, and he shouted for Pakistan. (48)
Violence of an unforeseen magnitude spreads everywhere. Life in Sialkot is no exception to the countrywide riots and killings. As more and more refuges enter the city with their tales of suffering at the hands of Hindus on the Indian side, Sialkot witnesses unprecedented arson and looting. Kanshi Ram never foresaw the possibility of the situation becoming so volatile. He thought that even if the country was divided, he could stay back in Sialkot, his hometown. He was complacent and naively believed that people of all religions could live together in peace as they had. He receives a rude shock when the situation in Sialkot changes from bad to worse.

Finding themselves aliens in their own homeland, many families start moving to a safe place on the Indian side of the border. Kanshi Ram is so shocked at the situation that he says, “...we Indians had no right to ask for freedom” (109). It becomes clear to him how vulnerable the minority community is and that soon he too may have to leave. The very thought of leaving the place hurts him. He finds it excruciatingly painful to leave Sialkot:

Lala Kanshi Ram ran his hand over the wall of his room and something in him snapped, no, he couldn’t just give it up.

Behind these walls lay years of labour and hope. He was young though, he was only fifty, he could start a business somewhere else, in some town on the other side of the border.
But *could* he? Could he, *really*? He looked at his wife and Arun, and he knew how tired his arms and shoulders were.

You mean, to begin right from *scratch*? (110)

For one who has completely identified himself with Sialkot, it is not only impossible but also inconceivable: "The pinch was he should have to give up this land, this earth, this air. That's where the hurt lay!" (111). Kanshi Ram is still hopeful that the violence will die down: "... it was irrational, it was madness incarnate, this violence, and it had to stop" (114). However, when his shop is looted, he decides to leave Sialkot for a safer place. The pain of leaving is so intense that as his family begin to pack, he feels "an immense tightening of the heart. They [Prabha Rani and Arun] were stripping the walls bare, and Lala Kanshi Ram felt they were stripping his flesh from his body. The bone was showing – whichever way he turned" (121). What makes him finally leave is the hope that they may be able to return to Sialkot once the troubles are over. As K. C. Belliappa observes, "The human mind is known for its penchant for fantasy and he imagines his own death and begins to fantasise over it." He visualizes a decent and dignified burial for him at Sialkot. He wants to breathe his last in Sialkot because according to the *Vedas,*

...you retained a grain of consciousness right till the time when the fire reached and burned up your brain – at the last minute when the brain burst open and he was really gone, for
his spirit to look at the Aik and the land of Sialkot from above, from the sky, or to come down and roll in the dust of its fields – that would be the very pinnacle of his delight.

(Emphasis added) (125)

Kanshi Ram realizes that taking shelter at the refugee camp is inevitable and so moves to the camp along with his co-tenants. The major part of the rest of the novel is an enactment of the long, difficult, arduous march of the Hindus of Sialkot to the Indian border at Dera Baba Nanak. Kanshi Ram is shocked when he hears the news of the death of his daughter, Madhu Bala, and her husband, Rajiv. They were mercilessly killed along with many Hindu and Sikh passengers who were on their way to Sialkot.

It is not out of place here to refer to the autobiographical element in Azadi. There were people and incidents in Chaman Nahal’s life that we find in the novel. For instance, the death of Madhu Bala and her husband is based on a real-life experience of Nahal’s: “During the communal riots in the wake of Partition, this most courageous sister of mine was cruelly assassinated along with her husband in a train massacre.”

Arun is also rudely shocked to hear the news of his sister’s death. She was his earliest friend and companion. Like many young men, he fell in love with a beautiful young girl, Nur, daughter of Chaudhri Barkat Ali, who, as a pious Muslim, believed that
God is great and Muhammad is his prophet. But the same God is the God of the Hindus as well, and if they preferred to worship him in another form that was their business...His job was to live the life God had given him in friendship and love. And the Hindu next door was as much his brother, more his brother, than an unknown Muslim living elsewhere. (86)

As his father and Nur's father were friends, Arun and Nur used to meet quite often and Nur finally returned his love for her. He was so deeply in love with her that he was prepared to embrace Islam for her sake. However, as violence spread in the area, he realized that it was not the proper time to think of personal love. He decided to accompany his parents if they were forced to leave Sialkot. Mohan Jha observes, "...in the flush of his youthful romance Arun could have elected to go in for Nur in preference to his parents, but the communal holocaust suddenly makes 'a man' of him and he chooses to share the joys and sorrows of life with his parents." Thus Arun loses both his sister and Nur. But he believes that life should continue:

It was the continuity of life. It was the continuity of the will in the being of things. And never had this urge for survival, for self-assertion, manifested itself in Arun so powerfully as at this time of death. It was as if he would himself perish otherwise. (174)
Now that he cannot marry Nur and Madhu is no more, Chandni alone is the option. He loves her and tells his mother he will marry Chandni, daughter of a charwoman.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, Kanshi Ram decides to join others in their long-drawn and arduous march to Dera Baba Nanak. As the Indian authorities do not provide adequate protection to them, their convoy is ambushed three times; many are killed, many women abducted and raped, and at some places women are paraded naked.

Arun has two shattering experiences in quick succession at Narowal. In order to escape from a massive attack on their camp by a mob, he runs away into a field and accidentally meets his former acquaintance Captain Rahmat-Ullah-Khan of the Pakistan army. He kills him for molesting Sunanda Bala, daughter-in-law of Bibi Amar Vati, who was the landlady of the house in which Kanshi Ram and his family lived. At the refugee camp, while Kanshi Ram feels “defenseless and naked,” Sunanda

...walked with majesty even in grief, and floated out into the street like a tableau; her face pensive, her eyes downcast, her shoulders soft and sagging, her fingers firmly gripping her children. In all these years she had not once been exposed to unfamiliar eyes so mercilessly. Yet she walked unconcerned, she walked as though she still owned the world. (129)
Sunanda knew the Captain was after her and without any fear told Arun that she would kill him if he ever tried to touch her. But, a sensitive woman that she is, Sunanda broke into tears when she was abducted and raped by the Captain and when she learned that her husband had been killed in the attack on their camp. She, however, knows that life is for living and one must forget the past. She makes an affirmation by acquiring an old sewing machine and doing odd tailoring jobs. The sewing machine, “with all its continuous rhythmic movements, sounds and vibrations also suggests the continuous rhythmic flow of life.”

When Arun returns to the camp he has another shock, Chandni has been kidnapped. Thus he loses Chandni just as he lost Nur. Chandni’s abduction and his failure to trace her make him lose his enthusiasm and he becomes sick and demented. Even after he rejoins college at Delhi, he feels lonely without her. Though he feels like committing suicide, “he stayed alive, to feel his hurt. In death he would feel nothing, he thought. He wanted to feel his pain, to sense it. In that hurt he still had a bond with the girl. Without the hurt the bond might be lost” (305-306).

At last, shattered and dazed, the refugees enter India. At Amritsar, Kanshi Ram hears about a parade of naked Muslim women as revenge against people organizing similar parades across the border. While his fellow refugees derive a vicarious pleasure out of it, Kanshi Ram views it as man’s inhumanity to man. He tells his wife, “I have ceased to hate.... I
can’t hate the Muslims any more” (283). He thinks, rightly so, that Hindus are as much guilty of inciting violence and hatred in India as the Muslims are in Pakistan. As Munideva Rajendra points out, “Kanshi Ram’s sorrow and suffering are at last ... sublimated” and it dawns on him that “at the end of the day, it is love and forgiveness that would alone salvage the situation for the humanity caught in the coils of the unforeseen historical developments.”

When Prabha Rani express her resentment of the people of Pakistan, Kanshi Ram appeals to her to forgive them: “…That way alone can you make peace with yourself” (285). Thus Lala Kanshi Ram …takes a stance which clearly demonstrates his freedom from commitment to anything except love, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness, in a word, ‘freedom of spirit and mind’ which alone makes political freedom meaningful. The superficial differences of religion peel off and reveal the essential humanity of man and the idiocy of the evil that seeks to raise artificial walls of hatred between one human being and another.16
REFERENCES