Chapter II

In the Beginning is the End

*My True Faces*
*My True Faces* is Chaman Nahal’s first novel. As D.R. Sharma observes,

Chaman Nahal is not a rebel against life or one who believes that it means nothing. He is a determined and sturdy affirmationist whose novels reveal a sound commitment to moral values, to right action, to life itself. The background may be domestic, inter-cultural or the movement of history, but they are all irradiated with the emotional and spiritual luminosity of man, the potentiality of his being. His novels are celebrations of life and of those of its qualities which give it meaning and significance.

The title “My True Faces,” which clinches the basic theme, has been taken from a popular religious song and embodies the “Yoga of Divine Glories” enunciated in the tenth chapter of the *Gita*. Lord Krishna says, “There is no end of My divine manifestations.” Every human being is one of the faces of the Lord, but s/he should strive to be one of His “true” faces, in other words, try to be true to Him and true to herself/himself.

The novel *My True Faces* is about two individuals trying to recognize their true faces in the context of the struggle of the self against society. Nahal himself states that in this novel “I have dealt with the theme of how to live personally in a society that is so inhibitive because it
discourages individual living. One is constantly being asked to sacrifice one's pleasure for the sake of the society, for the sake of the clan, for the sake of the family.” Thus the novel is about individuals torn between duty to the self and duty to society.

The two main characters in the novel, Kamal and Malti, represent the traditional India and the modern India respectively. It is their incompatibility that leads to the breakdown of their marriage. The sandal’s incident in *Sunrise in Fiji* is an excellent comment on the relationship between Kamal and Malti: “the two halves always met and matched, if one made a real effort” (emphasis added) (28).

Another interesting point to note is that the entire action of the novel is confined to a few days, during which Kamal wanders about in search of his missing wife and child, and the earlier events are covered in a retrospective narration. The action of the novel takes place in Delhi. Kamal, the protagonist, is an earnest and sensitive, lonely and restless young man, the only son of a middle-class businessman. His psyche has been subjected to all the stresses and strains which growing up in a traditional Hindu family inevitably produces. He has to strictly follow the so-called dharma, which seems to crush the freedom of an individual. Marriage with Malti, the daughter of a well-to-do Rao Sahib, ushers in a brief interlude of uninhibited joy in sheer sex, which brings some sense of fulfilment. But in a short time, temperamental differences surface. Thus,
from almost the beginning of their marital relationship, we notice differences cropping up between Kamal and Malti. Malti, a working woman before marriage, wants to go back to her job, but feels trapped at the first signs of pregnancy. The rift between them widens after the arrival of the child. There are two main strands in the novel: Kamal’s struggle against society – against tradition – and his quarrel with another individual, Malti. Ultimately Kamal emerges victorious in his struggle against the inhibitive social system by affirming his self-identity, but he fails in his attempt to get his family back to him in that he refuses to accept Malti as his wife.

As the novel begins, we find that Malti Meena has abandoned her husband, Kamal Kant, and gone away with their little son Lallu, while Kamal is away from home. Quite interestingly, when this is taking place, we find that Kamal is with his mami and her son, Mukut, discussing with them his strained relationship with Malti:

‘I don’t care about fights, I can take them and deal with them as they come. It is the endless strain. She keeps on about something, all the time! A trivial little thing and she will pick it up and go on with it, hour after hour, hour after hour – You said this. You said that. Your mother said this. Your father said that – I think I’ll go crazy under the pressure...from words she came down to violence and started throwing things.
Small in size, she's hard as a rod. She stamps with her foot, she spits, she makes faces, she scowls, and the tongue in her mouth keeps lashing, saying whatever harsh or crude she can to hurt you!’ (11-12)

From their conversation we come to know about the reason for the differences between Kamal and Malti: Kamal represents tradition and Malti, modernity. This is made clear when Mukut says that it was Kamal’s fault to have married a Westernized girl: “It’s your fault. You wanted to marry a modern girl, didn’t you?” (12). It seems as though Kamal wanted to have both the worlds when he says, “In the West the women all have an education. They go and work, they have their careers. Yet that doesn’t prevent them from being fond of their men and taking care of them” (12). However, he knows that no person other than the husband and wife can bring harmony in a family, and that it is himself who has to face the problem:

He wanted to disappear for good, to run away from it all.

That was why he had left Mata Hari so early; he wanted to be away from Malti for a while. Only whichever escape route he thought of, at the end of it stood the same Malti, inflexible, unrelenting, waving her arms, stamping the ground with her foot, spitting at it, lashing out at him with her tongue. He knew not which way to turn. (14)
The present situation is the result of marriage between a sensitive young man and an educated self-willed working woman. Kamal married Malti with the fond hope that

... marriage would to some extent bring him independence from other people. This was the part of his dharma he dreaded the most – the necessity to submit to innumerable nobodies, who were connected with you through one bond or another. The uncles and aunts by blood he could understand. Yet the thousands of ‘uncles’ and ‘aunts’ who materialized from nowhere and demanded attention, the parasites on his emotional reserves, them he hated. Marriage would free him of them, he had thought. Marriage would give him the one person who would bring completion to him, the completion of his psyche. The two of them would then face the world together and need not a soul to depend on. (68-69)

The passage quoted above amply demonstrates the constricted life Kamal led in his family. Kamal’s problem, thus, is two-fold: he is torn between his sense of individuality and the dictates of his family on the one hand and between his traditional views and Malti’s modern views. Thus the novel presents a conflict between group and individual living; in other words, between family life and individual life. Kamal belongs to an orthodox Brahmin family, and “Dharma was the cardinal virtue taught at
the home Kamal grew up in" (23). He is an only son and the youngest surviving child in the family. In his childhood he was under the control of his father and grandmother. Ever since his childhood he has detested the regimentation at home:

As a child, he got restless at the demands dharma made on him. On rising from bed, he was required to go and touch the feet of those who were older than him. He must implicitly obey their every command. He must take off his shoes when he went into the room where they had their ‘temple’. He was not to yawn when the family prayers were being said, and must sit cross-legged on the ground, no matter how hard his legs ached. He must not mistreat his sisters, which meant he must suffer without protest when they bullied him. No food was to be served to him, until he had been to the toilet and had taken a bath. There were many other things as well. It is difficult for him to keep count of them all. (23)

Kamal’s father, Lala Mathur Das, was very particular that Kamal should meticulously follow the Hindu dharma: “…‘you will ever be unhappy, so long as you don’t follow your dharma’ ” (25). His mother was the only member of the family who showed concern for his views. Chaman Nahal gives an excellent description of a mother’s love for her child, especially when she is torn between love for her child and respect
for her husband. One who has observed traditional Hindu families will find Nahal’s description very realistic:

He was sorry his mother never took his part when he had these arguments with his father. Now and then his father would give him a beating, too. But his mother did not come forward to save him or help him. He could see her standing in a corner, crying. Yet that was all she was capable of—shedding tears. After the beating was over, she took him to her room and there cried a little more, holding him to her bosom and rocking to and fro. (24)

It can be said that such women, to use Henry Nash Smith’s phrase, seem to have a sound heart but a deformed conscience. Nahal also satirizes people like Lala Mathur Das who are interested more in the external aspects than the intrinsic values of the Hindu dharma. When, for instance, the prayers of Lala Mathur Das to the Lord were not answered and things went against him,

He was struck dumb .... To his family he said, ‘My karmas, my karmas!’ but he said this without grace or faith. He was choked with emotions and his voice would quiver and his whole body shake. All his devotion or bhakti had not taught him how to resign himself to his fate. (28)
Another important influence on Kamal was his grandmother: “Her life was a living example of untainted goodness and it germinated many seedlings in Kamal’s soul” (33). And when she died, Kamal lost his best companion. Here again Nahal seems to have followed the “convention” of the grandmother as the guiding force in any Indian story describing a typical Indian family. His grandmother’s death is perhaps the first stage in Kamal’s attempt to come out of the feeling of stunted emotional development as an individual. When he returned from the cremation ground, Kamal found the Gita that she used to read. Going through the marginal notes and the verses she had marked in ink, Kamal came to the conclusion that she would never be dead for him and would guide him throughout his life: “…he knew what she would want of him in life, want of him as a man” (33). This takes us back to the advice the grandmother had given him. When he asked her, “‘How does one truly take the name of the Lord, Bebai?’ she replied ‘‘Through action, my dear boy, through good deeds’” (32). Maybe the grandmother, when she said it, had in her mind what Lord Krishna tells Arjuna about Karma Yoga:

The ignorant work

For the fruit of their action:

The wise must work also

Without desire

Pointing man’s feet
To the path of his duty.
Let the wise beware
Lest they bewilder
The minds of the ignorant
Hungry for action:
Let them show by example
How work is holy
When the heart of the worker
Is fixed on the Highest.⁴

Here we notice the difference between Kamal's father and his grandmother. As mentioned earlier, the father's prayers were chiefly for the materialistic gains:

...Yet there was more the zeal to strike a bargain in his voice than piety and acceptance. Or rather the servility of a small businessman who could ill afford to annoy a benefactor from whom he remained ever hopeful of reaping big dividends.

(28)

For some more time Kamal continued to be an obedient son. The following passage clearly depicts the plight of young boys who are brought up by authoritarian parents:

...when his father said to him, 'You join me in business when you finish studies,' he said, 'Yes, father,' even though he did...
not like the idea. As a dutiful son, he felt he must abide by
the will of his father. When he said to him, ‘I don’t want you
to wear Western style clothes,’ again Kamal replied, ‘Yes
father!’ His father did not leave things at that, he insisted
Kamal wear churidars, something that had been out of fashion
for years but Lala Mathura Das continued to use. Kamal
quietly accepted that too. He was the only student at his
college who went to the classroom in churidars, but he
preferred to do this than to displease his father. (34)

Thus Kamal grew up to be a lonely and self-conscious youth.

When we move from chapter two to chapter three, we find Kamal a
completely changed man:

He had disappointed his parents in many ways. He had
finally refused to join his father in business. He had gone in
for much higher studies than his father ever wanted him to,
and was now a low-paid teacher in one of the local colleges.
He had switched over from the churidars to trousers and
jackets, and of the latest cut. He wore long hair, much longer
than his father thought tolerable. He occasionally drank and
smoked. He seldom sat with his family for the prayers and
hardly ever visited a public place of worship. (35)
Nonetheless he thought that he had not brought any disgrace to family, "he had at least not deviated from the path of dharma" (35). The irony is that Kamal also thought, like his father, only the external aspects of dharma were worth observing.

As Kamal was preparing to meet a girl with a view to marriage, he recollected events between his adolescence and youth. As an adolescent, Kamal led a lonely life as there was no other boy at home to share his thoughts. He was shy, nervous, and self conscious. He hesitated even to join other boys of his age group. Being physically weak, he did not want the other boys to humiliate him. When on a few occasions he met other boys, their talk about sex shocked him: "He remembered how shocked he was when he first came to know of the sexual act" (36). Recollecting all the incidents, Kamal was disappointed that though he had travelled a lot and was about to get married, he knew very little about women. He regretted that he possessed no direct, first-hand experience of anything:

Whatever he had received had been fed to him through the long sieve of dharma, and by the time it reached his consciousness, it was so devitalized, so flavoured with strange tinctures, he never knew what its natural taste was. (40)

The most important event in Kamal’s acts of defiance against his father was his marriage with Malti without any dowry. Yet he continued to believe that tradition has its influence on one’s life: “Kamal wanted to
be happy in wedlock, wanted the marriage to be a success, and he clung feverishly to the rituals of the ceremony” (48). Kamal and Malti enjoyed the bliss of marriage: “She the lotus, and he the bee” (61). However this happiness, as we notice later, was short lived: “With all his faith in conscience, in the voice of the atman, it took Kamal some months to realize his marriage was not a success” (64).

A close reading of the novel shows us clearly that Kamal’s revolt was not so much against his father as against dharma: “…he wouldn’t accept dharma as a yoke around his neck. From day to day, he must make his own decisions” (62). The moment he took the decision, Kamal felt a sense of relief: “It was an exhilarating decision, this, and for some time he experienced a strange releasing effect” (62).

In Kamal we have a man who does not want to continue in the shackles of dharma but not one who lacks any human sentiment. When he decided to be an independent householder, he “was worried about his mother” (63). He told her that he would visit her almost every day. On the same occasion, “To his father he made no apologies. He said he wanted to stand on his own feet and must go and set up a separate establishment” (63). However, as soon as Kamal and Malti started their family, differences between them started cropping up. Malti’s “cleanliness mania” (65) irritated Kamal. It is quite clear that when there is no compatibility between wife and husband, even little matters cause friction between them.
In other words, it is not these small matters in themselves that cause friction but one’s attitude to his/her spouse. The presence of Kamal’s parents added fuel to the fire and led to further rift between the two. The fundamental difference between Kamal’s attitude to life and Malti’s attitude to life is that the husband believes that a family is the coming together of two souls while the wife believes that members of a family should maintain their individuality. While Kamal’s complaint against Malti was “I thought you had come as an extension of the tree. You seem to have come with an axe to cut it into bits” (67), Malti felt that “Kamal had put her in a cage, had put her in a prison” (71): “I used to be as free as a bird and you’ve clipped my wings” (71).

In any society and especially in Indian society, the family background of an individual influences his/her marital life. If the husband and wife come from similar family backgrounds, there is less scope for difference of opinion cropping up between them than if they come from different family backgrounds. This is clearly seen in the case of Kamal and Malti. While Kamal comes from a traditional middle-class family, Malti is from a rich Anglicized family. While for Kamal “Marriage means learning to give someone else the supreme place in your emotions” (97), for Malti marriage seems to be only for physical pleasure. In addition, Malti was a career girl, a nurse, before she got married. She was sorry that
if she gave birth to a child she would not be able to go back to her profession:

As her pregnancy advanced, her sense of imprisonment or captivity became more acute. With the child kicking inside her, she felt she was not only in a cage but in a cage within a cage. The infant would keep her tied for years to come. (71)

She went to the extent of telling Kamal “I wish I didn’t have this child. It has chained me to you. I wanted to be free, and it has chained me to you” (74). The only relationship that continued was physical. It was the clash of priority between the husband and wife that resulted in perpetual tension and wordy warfare at home.

Chapter one of the novel is about the present, chapters two to six take us to the past, and chapter seven brings us back to the present. When Kamal, after seeking his aunt’s advice regarding his marital life, returns home, he comes to know that Malti, along with their son, has deserted him. Kamal had the first inclination of her intention when, after only six months of their married life, Malti said, “Kamal, I want a separation from you” (20). However, Kamal did not want to get involved in an argument:

They had their differences, but they were minor ones, and Kamal never imagined she was building up such designs in her mind. Separation and in Hindu dharma? And for what reason? And when she was about to be a mother? (20)
Now, to his horror, Kamal realizes that she has done what she threatened to do, and, what is worse, she has taken away their son also, maybe to make his suffering worse: “I did that on purpose! I wanted you to suffer. I know you love Lallu, and I wanted you to suffer for him” (229).

Kamal’s search for his wife and son forms the most significant part of the novel. His search is both physical and, through it, metaphysical. The search helps him redefine his values and get rid of some of his illusions. It is during the search that Kamal realizes how strongly dharma has influenced his life. When Kamal has a chance to sleep with a lady doctor, his dharma does not permit to him to do so. But the fact is that it is his conscience that holds him back though he thinks it is dharma that is responsible for it:

Through volition he had hoped to go beyond her and beyond dharma, all in one leap. *Yet the monster was supreme still.*

Not in its own name, but in the name of love this time, the poetry of the souls and other mirages. It wouldn’t let you rest in the present, would it? It did manage to cheat you once again, did it not? (Emphasis added) (165)

As Munideva Rajendra observes, “the novel fictionalizes the struggle and tribulations of a hyper-sensitive young man against the inhibitive Hindu tradition and the hypocritical middle class milieu in which he was born and brought up.”

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The search also helps Kamal analyze himself and the situation he is in, when he meets people who know his wife. Kamal first meets Prema Behan, Malti’s friend. When he asks her whether she approves of Malti’s leaving home and going away, Prema Behan replies, “Perhaps she had no other choice. She’s a modern woman, a career woman at that, and you shut her up in the house” (96-97). But Prema Behan does not seem to be sure about her views. When Kamal says that Malti could go back to her job, she cannot give an appropriate reply.

Miss Kami is the next woman he meets. She seems to be a mature person in analyzing people and situations:

‘I think Malti is over ambitious and Rao Sahib encouraged her to be so,’ she said.

‘I wouldn’t mind that. If she were to show some interest in me as well – ’ said Kamal.

Turning to Kamal, she said: ‘You will forgive me, Kamal, but I would also say it was perhaps a mismatch – between you and Malti.’

‘Really? How do you say that?’

‘Well, whereas Malti’s too modern – you know what I mean –
you are too naive. You go too much by trust. I learn you fell
for her the evening you saw her. I wish you had met her more
often and known more about her.’ (111)

Miss Karni refers to “the arrogance of the anglicized Hindu” who has
“taken on Western manners without taking on Western values” (111). As
she puts it, though she refers only to the girls who join her college, the
majority of Indians seem to belong to two categories: too Westernized or
too traditional. Miss Karni says to Kamal,

‘You see I have over six hundred girls in my college. I know
many of them and their parents. And this is what I have to
come up against almost every day. On the one hand you have
the highly sophisticated girls, coming from affluent families,
the army and the civil servant class, extremely arrogant,
swearing in English and humming English songs, but with no
awareness of what India is and what it stands for – girls who
will have heard of Tennyson or Wordsworth but not of
Aurobindo and Munshi Prem Chand. On the other hand is a
horde of meek, submissive girls, very gentle, very
considerate, but who wouldn’t do a thing unless it be in the
manner sanctioned by convention. I think there’s plenty
wrong with both the groups, and the tragedy of each of them
is the tragedy of modern India.’ (112)
When Miss. Kami refers to the tragedy of modern India, she seems to suggest that there should be some change in both attitudes: “One must have the ability to change within the context of one’s identity” (113).

The entire novel seems to be based on this dichotomy. We find a similar dichotomy in *Sunrise in Fiji*, in which we find the dichotomy as a struggle in one individual, Harivansh Batra. In his case, we find that it is a fight between materialism and humanism, and, towards the end of the novel, he realizes the truth of life. In both these novels Chaman Nahal seems to suggest a little moderation of the two extreme views. The fascination of some Indians for Western manners is satirized in *The English Queens*.

Some critics are of the view that “her discourse could have been shorter to avoid the impression that it is deliberately introduced. Moreover, it is of little help at the moment to Kamal who is both anxious and impatient, and therefore not receptive.” But if we take into account the major theme of the novel, it is clear that the focus is on severe orthodoxy versus extreme modernity. It is, therefore, appropriate that one of the characters, especially a minor character, is made to comment on the current situation in India.

The irony of the situation is that members of Kamal’s family, most of whom never supported him earlier, swing to Kamal’s defence and launch a battle against Rao Sahib. The author calls the confrontation
between the two families "The second battle of Mahabharata" (203).

Being a Professor of English, Chaman Nahal is quite successful in his adoption of the mock heroic style to describe the meeting of the families. The two families are likened to Pandavas and Kauravas.

There is a kind of truce between the two armies and they feel that there should be reconciliation between Kamal and Malti. However, Nahal's irony is at its best when members of the two families talk about the dharma of a husband and his wife: "Dharma insists that the place of a wife is in her husband's home," "Dharma insists that a husband treat his wife as his equal," "Dharma demands that a wife obey her husband," "Dharma demands that a husband love his wife," "Dharma asserts that the union of a husband and wife is inseparable until death," "Dharma directs a wife to bear many children to her husband," and "Dharma directs a husband to provide for his wife liberally." (213-214). What these people do not seem to have realized is that man created dharma for his benefit and not for thrusting it upon himself forcibly. In other words, man formulated his dharma and he was not created by dharma. The novel makes it clear that an individual must be guided by his own sense of dharma, which releases him from the clutches of age old principles of life which are no more relevant. What man needs, whatever may be the age, is to lead a dignified life as an individual and not become a slave to an outdated code of conduct. In other words, man achieves the highest form of happiness by
realizing his self. This is what Kamal does towards the end of the novel. Even the day he is supposed to be reunited with his wife and child, “there was no delight in him” (217). He wants to be himself, and he realizes that though it is his moral responsibility to take Malti back, there is no emotional necessity for it:

He would have to quietly take Malti back. Not that he resented that, maybe that’s what he wanted himself, at least he was aware of the moral necessity of it. Only he wanted an emotional necessity for it too. And the self in him was withered after the willful deception she had played on him. He would gladly have her back but with what accent – what added meaning to his destiny as a man? After all that’s what mattered to him most, not Malti, nor he himself, but the purpose of being alive in the flesh. (223)

When Kamal goes to Rao Sahib’s house, he does not notice any change in Malti’s attitude to life. She tells him that she hid herself and their son with the sole purpose of torturing him. When she does not show any signs of regret, Kamal decides to abandon her and regain his individual dignity:

...he could never take Malti back. It was the end. Strange how a thing came to an end, in spite of yourself. The invisible hand had made the decision for him at a stroke. No amount of
reasoning could stop it, no passion. The dark soul had taken over the charge of the being, and it said, fearlessly go ye traveler, go fearlessly. No, he couldn’t take this woman back and live with her. Dharma will have to be discarded too, along with her – and his family ties with his parents. (299)

Thus Kamal decides to be faithful to his self and not to any other self:

His sorrow of the past week became very dear to Kamal, in the new present. He had gone through fire in those days. But it was a fire which had purified him. No, he wouldn’t give up the one life he had for going round in circles with this woman. Malti he could see still needed him, and her desertion was a part of the cycle which fed itself and grew fat on agony, on wilful torment. Only he was above needs now, even the need to hate, and he would not make a sacrificial food of himself – not even for the sake of dharma. (230)

Thus Kamal’s quest for his wife and son turns into a quest for his self, his identity, though he himself is not aware of it.

In conclusion, it may be said that

The title of the novel, My True Faces, is in keeping with the philosophic content of the novel. It speaks out the vision of life propounded in the novel, namely, the diversity of God’s creation and the need to accept the diversity by acquiring a composite view of life. Such a
view of life requires a superior or purged state of mind, the way for which involves "torment" and "bleeding pain" of self as experienced by Kamal. He learns that Malti is but a manifestation of God. As he imagines Lord Krishna playing on his flute, the "soothing modulations" din into Kamal's ears telling him that "She [Malti] too is my face as you're, and all my faces are my true faces" (234).
REFERENCES


