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Diksha Mor
Research Scholar, Baba
Mastnath University, Rohtak,
Haryana, India

Existential crisis and identity in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*

Diksha Mor

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Abstract

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that places a strong emphasis on personal existence, freedom, and decision-making. Existentialism holds that no single theory can encompass the entirety of the experience of human life. Existentialism is a school of thought that holds that each person determines the purpose and essence of their existence. As the founder of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre advanced the idea that a man is nothing more than what he creates for himself. That is the first existentialist tenet. Sartre is essentially referring to what he refers to as man's past. Man encounters himself first to establish value is the purpose of existence. As he lives, every individual creates his essence. Western philosophy serves as the foundation for existentialism in Indian English novels, because of the trend toward westernization in our society and the modernization of human life. Man must now inevitably consider his identity and his place in the social and physical universe. The forces that surround and dominate the contemporary Indian are dictated and controlled by existentialist complexities. *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal is a tragic tale about the subcontinent's partition and the ensuing catastrophe. This partition is also an outcome of western culture or because of people from western culture. The novel portrays a picture of human cruelty and perversity realistically by recounting the specifics. Additionally, it boasts "amazing penetration and convincingness in its well-executed and compelling plot, clear-cut and easily recognizable characters and a type of gruesome, horrific atmosphere that has its piercing appeal."

Keywords: Chaman Nahal, *Azadi*, existential crisis, philosophical movement

Introduction

The psychology of human existence in all its complexity and paradoxes is known as existential psychology. The fact that real people are involved in actual situations makes a human being more than just an abstract idea. Existential psychology blends psychological principles with the central philosophical question.

This field examines how these metaphysical issues impact the mind and behavior. It focuses on how to live successfully in the face of conflicts between right and wrong, hope and despair, love and hate, courage and safety, and other such tensions. It is an advanced form of positive psychology that shows people how to live well and pass away despite the difficulties and tensions that characterize everyday life. In 1947, after India gained independence from the British Empire, the subcontinent was divided along sectarian lines through the Partition of India. It resulted in the creation of the Muslim-majoritarian state of Pakistan in the north and the Hindu-majoritarian Republic of India in the south. However, the partition destroyed Pakistan as well as India because it prevented many deaths from looting, murder, rape, and rioting, but also caused the displacement of people from their homes. The economies of the two nations were in recession when they gained their independence, and neither had a well-established, efficient system of administration.

Azadi by Chaman Nahal is a contemporary masterpiece that hides an all-encompassing revelation of life that represents the instability that the country's partition caused for its citizens on both a societal and personal level. *Azadi*, a composition by Chaman Nahal that is a part of *The Gandhi Quartet*, has a deeper depth that captures the complete scope of Indian life during the Gandhian era. Through a literary lens, it depicts the historically accurate documentation of the horrible conflicts brought on by the division. Since Chaman Nahal was a refugee himself, his writing is incredibly insightful and realistic. As a result, he wrote about his own experiences using the figure of Lala Kanshiram and his son. The narrative portrays

Corresponding Author:
Diksha Mor
Research Scholar, Baba
Mastnath University, Rohtak,
Haryana, India

the tranquil setting before the declaration of Partition, the horrific events that resulted from it, and the miserable conditions experienced by the displaced refugees following the Partition. The setting for the novel *Azadi* is Sialkot, which is currently in Pakistan. The author claims that before the partition, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs coexisted harmoniously in Sialkot, a city where Muslims make up the majority. However, it was shaken when Lord Mountbatten announced the founding of Pakistan and India. People in Sialkot began to feel more fear, hostility, and animosity and for the first time, riots broke out there.

Azadi (Independence) is a deftly constructed work of fiction, and the interior stitching and overall coloring are faultless. The novel's plot is broken up into three sections: "Lull", "Storm" and "Aftermath." All three components are thoughtfully set up and connected. Each of the three segment titles has specific importance and symbolic value. The opening segment of "Lull" mostly describes the tranquil existence and quiet atmosphere in Sialkot before the news of partition and how "lull" vanished from Sialkot following the announcement. The people of Sialkot were united even though Islam predominated in the city. This is made possible by the friendship between Lala Kanshi Ram and Barkat Ali as well as the romance between Arun and Nur. Choudhary Barkat Ali and Lala Kanshi Ram were not only close friends but also kin. Both families experienced joys and losses together. Choudhary Barkat Ali informs Lala Kanshi Ram, influenced by Gandhi's speech: You are my brother from today. (*Azadi* 101)

The relationship between Arun and Nur, descendants of Chaudhary Barkat Ali and Lala Kanshi Ram, is later revealed to the public. Arun is prepared to convert to Islam for her benefit. The unity between Muslims and Hindus is also demonstrated by Munir's advice to him. The second section, "Storm" depicts a ferocious storm that approaches Sialkot like a nightmare. The horrors are described in detail in this section. According to Srinivas Iyengar: The 'leaders' had sowed the wind of communal suspicion and partition was the result; like a whirlwind, the mad act of partition was uprooting masses of humanity, mangling them and throwing them across the border heap after heap. (498)

Lala Kanshi Ram and Barkat Ali get unhappy when the storm hits the city. Along with learning of the murder of her husband, Kanshi Ram in the refugee camp also learns about the death of his daughter Madhu, who was killed by a cruel Muslim while traveling by rail from Wazirabad to Sialkot. Hindus and Sikhs find it extremely challenging to even cross a public street. Arun and Suraj Prakash attempt to locate Madhu's body by going to Barkat Ali and the railway station despite numerous obstacles.

Following are the gruesome specifics provided by Chaman Nahal about the atrocities; dismembered limbs, dozens of them legs and arms, and hands and thighs, and feet. The fire had consumed other parts of the bodies; it was the part that had not fully burned that stood out. And there were the skulls... Many lay faces down; the others faced the sky or looked sideways...Very often a skull cracked open with a popping noise, its bones disintegrating into the heap around. Since it was a quiet night, the sound came like the crack of a rifle; it was an unnerving sound. (183-184)

Kanshi Ram, who had previously insisted on remaining in Sialkot, now insists on leaving as soon as possible for India. He was forced to leave Sialkot along with his family, all of his possessions, and friends like Barkat Ali. During this

period, Arun, Kanshi Ram's son, was compelled to give up his love for Nurul Nishar and leave her. The Muslim community began to celebrate the founding of Pakistan with drumming and fireworks. They then began setting one Hindu "Mohalla" (residential area) on fire every evening. The store of Lala Kanshi Ram was robbed. Hindus were all compelled to flee to a camp for refugees. The families of Lala Kanshi Ram and other people were then forced to travel to India on foot in convoy. The caravan went in the direction of the Indian border despite being wounded in spirit. Three attacks were made on the march. Chandni was kidnapped at the refugee camp, and Sunanda lost her husband. *Azadi* (Independence) extremely accurately depicts social problems by describing the atrocities performed by fanatical Muslims against Hindu ladies in the march at the bazaar in Narowal to demonstrate how terrible and deadly the results of intergroup hate can be: There were forty women, marching abreast. Their ages varied from sixteen to thirty... there were two women...who must have been over sixty. They were all stark naked...They were all crying; though their eyes shed no tears...the bruises on their bodies showed they had been beaten and manhandled. Their masters walked beside them and if any of the women sagged or hung behind, they prodded her along with the whips they carried...The procession moved through the bazaar (marketplace) and along with the procession moved a river of obscenities- foul abuses, crude personal gestures, a spurt of sputum.

As soon as the women came near, that section of the crowd became hysterical 'Rape them', 'Put it inside of them.'... Many men in the front rows of the crowd lifted their lungis (a colored piece of cloth wrapped around the waist) to display their genitalia to them (*Azadi* 292-294).

In this approach, Nahal successfully illustrates the effects of Partition on the two nations as a whole and women in particular. Urvashi Butalia poses an important query regarding the situation faced by women during division: Why was it that we heard so little about them? How had they experienced the anguish of the division, the euphoria of the newly-forming nations? My assumptions were simple: firstly, these questions had remained unasked because of the patriarchal underpinnings of history as a discipline. I also believed (and this view has been considerably qualified since) that in times of communal strife and violence, women remain essentially non-violent, are at the receiving end of violence as victims, and are left with the task of rebuilding the community. (*Butalia* 55)

As a result, the moral and cultural aspects of society were seriously impacted. The morality of the people had fallen so low that they had lost the honor and dignity of the "woman of whom they were born". Nothing but the racial animosity engendered by the division was to blame for this deterioration. They eventually arrive in India. A hut-like camp is provided for family members of Bibi Amar Vati and Lala Kanshi Ram to dwell in. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and various responses to it are depicted in the final section, "Aftermath" which covers the incidents following the separation and independence. Violence kills the priest of nonviolence. All refugees, bar a handful like Kanshi Ram and Sunanda, blame Gandhi for the catastrophe of the division. In those days, it was customary to feel resentful and angry when discussing Gandhi. After Gandhi's killing Arun, Sunanda and Bibi Amar Vati had a dialogue that is worth exploring:

Well, it is a good thing he is gone. He brought nothing but misery to us...It all happened because of the partition. And it was Gandhi who sanctioned the partition. 'That's not true. Arun felt he had to put the record straight. 'It was the Congress leaders, like Nehru and Patel'. 'They were his stooges'. 'No, auntie. You are wrong there. In the final days, they didn't listen to him. (*Azadi* 366-367)

Lala Kanshi Ram, the book's main character appears as someone who rises above the level of an individual to become a universal man despite all these horrifying events they endured during their terrible voyage between Sialkot and the opposite side of the border.

His life experiences have given him the ability to view life with compassion and humanity, which has assisted him in developing a cosmic perspective on it. An example from Kanshi Ram Lala and Prabha Rani's dialogue demonstrates Kanshi Ram Lala's epic-like nature:

We are all equally guilty, he said, spacing his words apart. 'Each of those girls in that procession at Amritsar was someone's Madhu, and there must have been many amongst the dead you saw at Ambala'.

Without knowing it, Prabha Rani was weeping. Softly, she called, 'Madhu, Madhu, Madhu. ...' And she repeatedly shook her head, for she did not agree with her husband.

'Forgive. That way alone can you make peace with yourself?

She shook her head in slow motion and continued to weep.

'There's no other way', he said.

'As a last resort –yes. But I don't believe in it.

'You have to. To forgive fully. (*Azadi*, 300)

Lala Kanshi Ram is an amazing character because of the nobility and power of his thoughts. In some ways, he stands in for the qualities of human understanding, tolerance and wisdom that are associated with Indianness. Even through the most trying times of his life, he remains stable, strong, and unflappable. The novel brings up this epic aspect of Kanshi Ram Lala's persona to highlight the fact that *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal has this as one of its main themes. Partition literature in English is a true chronicle of numerous violence and brutal occurrences, but it also shows certain people who overcome intergroup hatred and uphold some core Indian beliefs. The people who stand for the goals of humanity are Barkat Ali and every member of his family. Lala Kanshiram, a fictional character portrayed by Chaman Nahal, talks about several different aspects of the British occupation that contributed to the partition of India. He has conflicting feelings about the British. While praising them for their virtues, he also critiques them for their flaws. He embraced the British Raj warmly and relished its security. His war-torn country has seen some kind of peace thanks to the British. He claims: "He reasoned that they are a tough nation to defeat. A small group of them have ruled over us for more than 200 years, and now that Hitler has suffered the same fate at their hands, they are no longer able to do so." Lala Kanshi Ram also hailed the police and the repressive authority of British rule. However, Lala Kanshi Ram accuses the British of failing to safeguard the refugee just before leaving his home. He also attributes the mistakes to the Britishers. The tactical mistake the British made in appointing an ugly Viceroy during the critical years of their Raj was what ultimately caused them to lose India, not Gandhi or the uprising of the people.

As we know that author Chaman Nahal, who was also a victim of the partition, has experienced agony and sadness as a result of the characters Kanshiram, Arun, and other Hindus from Bibi Amaravati's prison sentence representing having to leave behind their homes and other possessions. Nahal also depicts the suffering caused by a loved one's separation. Many lovers only lost their beloveds due to the division or abandoned them on the other side of the border, as was the situation with Arun and Nur in *Azadi*. Due to the division, many friendships were formed, as demonstrated by Choudhury Barkat Ali and Lala Kanshiram in *Azadi*. Nahal also portrayed the plight of immigrants who fled to India from their own countries. The author tries to show us that those who crossed the border did not all receive the bare minimum of services from the government. The author of the story targets the authorities who are responsible for dividing India into two parts.

First of all, he states at the outset that Gandhi and Rajaji had considered creating an independent country called "Pakistan" that would be mostly for Muslims. However, they later refuse to approve of the separation of India. In contrast, Jinnah pressures the Congress party to establish "Pakistan", especially for Muslims. M.A. Jinnah gains notoriety as Muslim's most illustrious mentor in this method. They still support him with great loyalty.

The author blames political figures in general and Jinnah in particular for the terrible effects of Partition. "Azadi is about the freedom struggle of India ending into a tale of woe – a holocaust, genocide, massdestruction, arson, rape, carnage, and turbulence, gerrymandered by the British and the Muslim League." (Sharma 194).

When Lala and his family finally make it to Delhi, they must deal with several issues. Their relocation is the main issue. The custodial officers are unwelcoming and greedy for bribes. Kanshi Ram wanted to become a renter in a house since he was tired of living in a refugee camp, but the Delhi residents refused to let him because he was a Punjabi. They believed the Sikhs to be aggressive individuals. His attempts to locate a private residence in Delhi thus proved fruitless. He becomes extremely desolate and dejected due to his fruitless quest for a home and government official's uncompromising attitude. Isher Kaur, a co-tenant of Bibi Amr Vati's home with Lala Kanshi Ram, and Sardar Tej Singh manage to find some refuge in the Delhi suburbs. After encountering numerous challenges, Kanshi Ram and his family finally make it to India. He relocates to Kingsway Camp on Alipur Road and begins a new chapter in his life by opening a modest company, such as a convenience store, to support himself. Even Sunanda Bala, the wife of Suraj Prakash, relies on her employment as a tailor for her living. Kanshi Ram experiences a loss of self-respect as a result of the devastating effects of Partition. As a result, he removes his turban. He was devoid of all dignity. *Azadi* claims that he was previously wearing a forage cap, but he has recently ceased doing so to reveal his public helplessness and sad conditions. When he hears the tragic news of Mahatma Gandhi's murder at this time, it comes to him as a sudden shock, and his realization that everything has come to an end is caused by the tragic passing of Mahatma Gandhi. Everyone pays Gandhi their final respects while expressing their sorrow at his tragic passing. He was murdered solely due to racial prejudice. Jawaharlal Nehru's news of Gandhi's death plunges the entire nation into a state of absolute despair.

The narrative concludes with the discovery of the “loss of identity” and the news of Mahatma Gandhi’s passing. Lala Kanshi Ram sadly realizes that the achievement of independence or Azadi, came at the expense of great human suffering and sorrow. The following action of his represents his “loss of identity” and dignity; Lala Kanshi Ram was severely injured. He had ceased donning a turban since opening this small store. A turban was a symbol of dignity and respect. His sense of decorum was gone. He was now donning a forage cap. Or he sat headless, proclaiming to the world his lowly station. (*Azadi* 366)

Azadi is a magnificent illustration of an existential crisis on the side of Lala Kanshiram, or more specifically, the female characters. Even though all of the characters experience several doubts and reflect on the fundamental concerns of life as well as other difficulties like angst, dissatisfaction, anxiety and independence.

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