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Voyeuristic Presentation of Female Characters in Nahal's *Azadi*

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Abstract

Fiction written on the theme of Partition India took place in 1947 has always been an important genre of Indian English Fiction writing. The bloody riots of Partition, abduction, horrid atrocities in the form of migration, mass rape and unforeseen violence affected many creative minds of India and Pakistan's writers. This paper probably deals with how the essence of the past gets shattered by the fact the Partition written in 1960s and 1970s projecting female characters as a commodity, merely a sex object in their narrative texts as in Nahal's *Azadi*. How the projected pornographic and submissive image of female characters in the narrative text becomes the tool to arouse curiosity in male readers.

Keywords: *Partition, violence, migration, commodity, rape, male gaze, India*

Voyeuristic Presentation of Female Characters in Nahal's *Azadi*

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The partition of India not only created two new independent nations but also resulted in one of the greatest forced migration in human history. Millions of frightened people dislocated from their ancestral homes and fled across borders. The atrocious tragic events of partition hold the mirror up to what the partition was in the annals of Indian history in which a hundred thousand women were raped, abducted, mutilated about three hundred thousand were slaughtered and twelve million people rendered homeless. It is difficult to imagine the impact of traumatic experience of the tragedy of human life especially on women. Probably over 75,000 Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women were abducted and raped during Partition. The brutal form of sexual violence forced number of women to commit suicide or killed by their family members on the name of honour killing.

The porno graphical description of sexual rivalry between Hindu and Muslim men over the possession of women's body with "rape" emerges as a textual rape in Partition narratives. This repeated voyeuristic drama of sexual violence in the form of mass rape and parading naked women in the procession becomes the erotic text of the Partition narratives like *Azadi*. This paper focuses on how the "actual rape" of women during Partition and then the "textual rape" in the Partition narratives produced by Hindu male authors becomes the "symbolic rape" of the nation. Hindu and Muslim women are graphically sketched as a commodity by the male authors like Chaman Nahal through rape, voyeurs, victim of male gaze during naked processions and other than that some of the unwanted love making scenes in the Partition narratives.

Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), the winner of Sahitya Academy Award is the third major well written Indo-Anglian novel on the theme of partition. It is a historical novel that depicts a graphical detail of catastrophic and rapes incidents during partition. The novel vividly portrays the horrors of the partition assumes an epic dimension.

Azadi is divided into three parts: 'The Lull', 'The Storm' and 'The Aftermath'. It begins in Pakistan and ends in India. The setting of the novel is in Sialkot, where the writer Nahal was himself born. The story sketches on a wider canvas and presents a graphic picture of the savage acts of plunder, rape and brutal murders in an insane manner. 'The Storm' describes the memorable journey of the fleeing refugees on the Indo-Pakistan border. As Rupinder Singh Saini writes in his research article:

"Nahal gives a detailed description of what happened to women during partition. Many women were kidnapped and kept forcibly some were

subjected to mass rape, at times in public places in the presence of large gatherings. The rape was followed by other atrocities, chopping off the breasts and even death. Men were turned into monsters and indulged in horrifying atrocities.” (P. 74)

As a matter of fact, it always has been observed that in Indo-Anglian fiction writing women characters are never portrayed as the strong image. They have always been portrayed far away from the female sensibilities. The objectified image of female characters has always been the dominant form of Indo-Anglian fiction. As Atiya Singh remarked in her research article:

“Indo-Anglian novel writing will acquire a new uninhibited dimension of self-expression, which has remained confined to depiction of love and sex scenes so far. Love, as a strong sustaining force between two adults has never so far been portrayed with depth in Indo-Anglian fiction. If it is portrayed, it has always been done showing people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Love between two individuals, experiencing the emotion as an intense coming together of two sensibilities, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, is almost negligible. The physical aspect seems to gain predominance.”

However in Nahal’s Azadi women’s perspectives and their views and sensibilities are missing somewhere. The absence of women’s psychology is perceptible, as no woman character is fully developed and they haven’t been presented as the victim of the partition. The traumatic experiences of Partition that went through over the bodies and soul of the women is not projected in depth. As Radhika Purohit observes:

“The female characters in the story merely exist in the shadow of the dominant themes of politics, religion and communalism. As such the perspective in which the story is presented is that of a man. The depiction of women victimization lacks the feminine experience and sensitivity. Perhaps a different dimension would have been added to the story, if the Partition violence had been presented through the experiences of a woman as a victim of the actions perpetuated by men.”

Around all the female characters in the Partition narratives including especially Nahal’s Azadi do not sufficiently bring out the importance of the presentation of the female form in a symbolic order. All female characters function under patriarchal consciousness and stand in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other. Even Nahal’s Perceptions are more sensual than sensitive:

“Secondly, Indo-Anglian fiction cannot lay claims to the portrayal of the finer sensibilities of a woman by male writers, as Henry James, Rabindranath Tagore or Bankim Chatterjee have done. For most Indo-Anglian male writers, the woman is either a repressed individual or merely a sex object. Woman, as a thinking, sensitive human being has not so far been portrayed in their novels. The depth with which Henry James could conceive his female characters and Hardy explore the consciousness of feminine sensibility is lacking in Indo-Anglian fiction by male writers.”

Analyzing Azadi from a feminine point of view one can say without any hesitation that its approach is overall male-oriented. Though so many characters are in the novel but their roles are very less and especially the role of women characters has been marginalized. As a matter of fact women enter in the Nahal's text from where the description of their body begins whereas the description of male body is not found anywhere.

The unwanted love making scenes and the graphical description of female body limit the existence of women characters in Nahal's Azadi. The image of Lala Kanshi Ram's wife Prabha Rani has been portrayed as always a devoted wife. She is not educated and always has been seen taking care of her husband and following his commands. For Lala Kanshi Ram she was the "rural stock" (36) and so "he continued to climb on her" and could think "ravishing her again" (38). Lala Kanshi Ram is portrayed as the head of the family whereas Prabha Rani is portrayed as a peasant and illiterate woman whom Lala Kanshi Ram married:

"Pontifically he lurched forward and took hold of the opportunity of revealing the mysteries of the universe to this peasant woman, whom he had married when she was only thirteen and could not tell an 'alif' from a 'bai' – who till this day thought they lived on a flat earth and not a round one. He had since taught her many things, including how to sign her name, though she could read and write. He would teach her more, he said to himself complacently."
(P. 16)

As a matter of fact women enter in the Nahal's text from where the description of their body begins whereas the description of male body is not found anywhere. The image of women characters is like they are needed in the scenes for the body show and its measurement. Prabha Rani is portrayed as a passive figure, illiterate and a dutiful wife. The image of Prabha Rani is a peasant and a dutiful wife who always remains busy in household chores and taking care of her husband which is her foremost duty and so she is a good woman. Other than that these women are missing somewhere:

"Prabha Rani was of healthy, rural stock, and today, at the age of forty eight, she was fit as a horse, had all her thirty eight teeth in her mouth, and menstruated regularly like a girl of eighteen. Lala Kanshi Ram did not quite stay with his vow, he continued to climb on her, but since he had to be extra careful about not giving her a child..... his life." (P. 37)

The projection of all three women in the novel – Nur, Chandani, and Sunanda are described as the victims of patriarchal male gaze. In-fact they all are visualized by the men on the basis of their body. Their body's description begins in the text as they enter in the novel. As Shumona Dasgupta wrote in her paper:

"Azadi ascribes visibility of women only as sex "objects" who mark the different phases of Arun's psychological, moral, sexual, and intellectual development. It therefore constructs female identity in accordance with the needs of the male unconscious, or the ideological demands of crisis fiction. Arun's elder sister Madhu had first presented him as a potential suitor to her

friends, and her death pushes him towards the “threshold of adult life” (188). His aborted relationship with Nur figures as a youthful romantic dalliance which serves to underline his naivety, and his relationship with Chandani marks his sexual and political awakening. All the women in the novel – Nur, Chandani, and Arun’s neighbor Sunanda – are described in hyper-sexualized terms as passive objects of the patriarchal gaze.” (P. 35)

Undoubtedly, Nahal’s text has adapted a narcissistic way of portraying women characters as commodity or objects for men’s pleasure. In a way Nahal has prayed on the reader’s perversion and voyeuristic fantasies which satisfy the men spectators during partition and as well as the readers while reading the text.

The narrative’s text clarifies how women characters are objectified and meant the personal property used by men and thrown having used it. In a scene the conversation between Suraj Prakash and Niranjan Singh clarifies the cheap mindset of men like Suraj Prakash. Even in the great tragic condition of Partition character like Suraj Prakash is discussing with Niranjan Singh and thinking and desperately willing to take an undue advantage of sleeping with Muslim women as he asks to Nirajan Singh, ‘Don’t you want to sleep with a Muslim girl? You have no idea. Muslims girls are so good in bed ...’ (P. 253)

The very next incident after this, the height of extreme violence can be seen in Nahal’s text parading naked Hindu women in the form of a procession which is carried by Muslim men in the town of Nanowal in Pakistan. While reading the text the humiliation which suffers the abducted Hindu women is too terrific to shake the soul of any reader from inside. The interminable description of the parade of Hindu naked women involves a horrific sight of humiliation indeed crushes the spirit of many female readers. From where the procession arrived, the scene was of extreme sensuality and vulgar:

“They were all stark naked. Their heads were completely shaven; so were their armpits. So were their pubic regions. Shorn of their body hair and clothes, they looked like baby girls, or like the bald embryos one sees preserved in methylated spirit. Only the breasts and the hips gave away the age. The women walked awkwardly, looking only at the ground. They were all crying, though their eyes shed no tears. Their faces were formed into grimaces and they were sobbing. Their arms were free, but so badly had they been used, so wholly their spirits crushed, their morale shattered, none of them made any attempt to cover themselves with their hands. They swung their arms clumsily, often out of coordination with their legs. The bruises on their bodies showed they had been beaten and manhandled. Their masters walked besides them and if any of the women sagged or hung behind, they prodded her along with the whips they carried.” (P. 296)

In the procession men can be seen living out their fantasies through their linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of women like still tied to their place as the slaves following the order of their masters. The constitution of the male gaze,

continuous exists as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking female naked body as an object. At the extreme, procession becomes hysterical and fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs, whose only sexual satisfaction comes first by watching it, in an active controlling sense, an objectified female body as the procession moves through the bazaar:

“The procession moved through the bazaar, and along with the procession moved a river of obscenities – foul abuses, crude personal gestures, spurts of sputum, odd articles like small coins, faded flowers, cigarette butts and bidis that were thrown at the women. As soon as the women came near, that section of the crowd became hysterical. ‘Rape them.’ ‘Put it inside of them.’ ‘The filthy Hindu bitches.’ ‘The kafir women.’ Some said worse things. Then came the shower of spittle. Almost everyone spat, and hundreds of tongues were pushed forward inside of their teeth and hundreds of lips twisted into ugly openings and hundreds of uplifted faces canon - like fired the saliva. Bits of the saliva fell on the crowd ahead, but no one minded, so long as the main salvo hit the women. Many men in the front rows of the crowd lifted their lungis to display their genitals to them. Others aimed small articles at them and tried to hit them. Again, by some arrangement, no one threw a rock. Injury to the women would have brought the procession to an end and they wanted the women to parade. And almost to the last man, whether they spat or shouted or threw things or just stood with their mouths open, they stared at the pubic regions of the women. Through indelicate exposure those areas had lost their glory, lost all magic, and there was only a small, slippery aperture you saw there. But men’s eyes were settled on these apertures. And the moment the women had passed ahead, the eyes were settled on the bruised buttocks.” (P. 297,298)

The great humiliation and hatred scene can be seen through the dominant forms, structured ways of seeing and pleasure in looking the submissive female body. Pleasure is used in the narrative text for men onlookers as a radical weapon to see the naked bruised body in pain. Suraj Prakash Sunanda’s husband appears in the text as an idiot seems too excited to see the procession of naked women and asks Arun to join him. In fact, Arun and Suraj buy paan and get ready to see the procession. Not only he enjoys the scene of extreme sensuality but also he asks Arun shamelessly, ‘What’s the matter Arun? Didn’t you enjoy the show?’ As Rupinder Singh Saini writes:

“Suraj Prakash (an idiot) thoroughly enjoys the scene and afterwards he wants to have a drink to prolong his excitement and his face looks ecstatic. And this is precisely why the writer describes such a scene; he wants to show that only idiotic people like Suraj Prakash could enjoy such a revolting scene. Nahal adds another scene of parading the naked women on this side of the border to show that barbarism did not confine itself to any single community.”

Nahal’s Azadi commences the graphic and sexualized description of the female characters through the spectacle of male spectators, male writers, male narrators and of course the male readers too. As a matter of fact about all female characters are

victimized of male gaze. However the narrative rejects the female characters in action and protesting against the physical violence against them. Female body is used as a metaphor through the voyeuristic presentation in the form of rape merely in order to arouse the curiosity in male readers, who can actually feel the ways of controlling women through the erotic scenes depicting sexual violence. The presentation of female characters is limited to their body aspects and where their body's description ends, they are immediately taken out of the narrative's text. The actual rape during Partition becomes the textual metaphorical rape through the voyeuristic presentation of female characters in an erotic way in the narrative.

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