International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-11, Issue-5; September-October, 2026

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

The Paradox of Freedom: Reimagining Partition in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*

Dr Yash Pal Singh

Associate Professor (English), Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India
yashpalsingh.english@dsc.du.ac.in

Received: 20 Sep 2026; Received in revised form: 15 Oct 2026; Accepted: 20 Oct 2026; Available online: 24 Oct 2026
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract— *This paper investigates how Chaman Nahal's Azadi offers a poignant canvas of the devastating and lasting effects of partition on individuals, communities, and shared cultural spaces in the Indian subcontinent. Through politics of religion and cartographic violence, the idea of the division of territory was executed insensibly, fracturing lived spaces, identity, memory, and belonging. The expectations, desires, and dreams of attaining freedom from British imperialism ultimately culminate in a paradoxical situation. Nahal underscores that partition is not simply a historical moment but a political quirk that accompanies displacement, violence, and commodification of the female body. The familiar landscapes, homes, neighbourhoods, and ancestral places transform into sites of displacement for Hindu-Sikh minorities in the western Punjab. The paper examines how this restructuring of borders produces experiences of exile, alienation, and economic and cultural loss. The decision imposed from above adversely affects ordinary people whose identities and social relationships were formed beyond region and religion. It further foregrounds how the vibrant socio-cultural thread of the Sialkot region is snapped by the departing British apparatus and emerging Indian and Pakistani regimes, causing communal conflict, bloodshed, and forced migration. The paper argues that Azadi illustrates that freedom comes with a deeply ambivalent condition, marked by enduring cost.*

Keywords— ***Partition, Communal Conflict, Borders, Maps, displacement, Loss.***

Introduction

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel, was published in 1975. The novel primarily chronicles the theme of Partition, drawing on the experiences of the people affected by this miscalculated political decision, which was taken and executed within a very short period. The regions subject to division had their respective distinct linguistic and cultural identities and serve as the microcosm. The novel portrays the lives of people from the city of Sialkot inc the province of western Punjab in undivided Hindustan. The entire geographical territory is renowned for its vibrant culture and economic prosperity. Nahal's narrativization encompasses the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and altogether weakening colonial grip and strengthening of the freedom movement in India. Under Gandhi's leadership the movement ensured that the country would gain independence without any kind of violence and bitterness among diverse communities, but the outcome was otherwise. It illustrates how the brewing tension and apprehension developing along religious lines shattered the cohesiveness between the Hindu and Muslim communities. The Muslim League's demand for a separate nation was supported by the Britishers, who always manipulated the vulnerability of human beings and ruled through the politics of 'divide and rule'. This paper aims to examine the irony of the hard-won independence, for which Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims sacrificed their lives together, but whose aftermath transformed the innocent people into an opinionated frenzied and hysterical mob. Ayesha Jalal explores the root of the Hindu-Muslim tension long before the idea of partition, though "The pre-eminent view of Indian nationalism has been that of an inclusionary,

accommodative, consensual and popular anti-colonial struggle" (Jalal 183). The common masses, living together for centuries without any visible distinction or prejudice, celebrating each other's festivals with mutual respect, turn belligerent and bloodthirsty over a couple of days. The novel underscores how communal coexistence, with shared language, culture, traditions, and regional identity, ceased to exist any longer with the declaration of freedom. Prior to Partition, despite separate communal schools and committees, peace and harmony among the people historically never got a turbulent turn; they always remained accommodating by prioritising their commonality and reciprocity.

Nahal paints a realistic and comprehensive picture, negotiating history from below by reconstructing the lives of the people with individual and shared memories and experiences. Private narratives of the individuals in the novel form a comprehensive and powerful canvas of the drastically changing times. Lala Kanshi Ram, a prosperous grain merchant having a shop in the main bazar of Sialkot, symbolises the settled middle class that established itself with industriousness and perseverance and want peace and stability so that their trade and business could flourished. This class holds resources, business, and good local connections, and unlike other people, they possess an ambivalent feeling for the Britishers. Lala Kanshi Ram, a representative of this class, has a deep faith in Gandhi's struggle for freedom, but simultaneously appreciates the British administration for its guaranteed law, order, justice, and public safety. This places him in a state of utter confusion. He neither wants the British to rule India nor agrees to their complete departure, as he fears crime, riots, and instability after their departure. For him "there indeed was no Raj like Angrez Raj" (Azadi 31). The idea of freedom seems to be problematic, as the undercurrent momentum for division of the nation, demanded and supported by the communal elites, is bound to unfold suffering for minorities. Bodh Prakash finds "the decision to partition India in the year of her independence was the outcome of a particular kind of political mobilization from the late 1930s. The stridency of Muslim League demands for the creation of a separate Muslim nation reached a crescendo by the 1940s" (Prakash 01). The novel is a critique of the inability of these elites to assess the situation. Irrespective of diverse religions, the people had their own distinct identities, but their worldview is firmly rooted in the shared idioms, interconnectedness and interdependence. The decision to divide the country on the sole basis of religion and not taking sensitive diversity into consideration highlights the callousness of the British withdrawal as well as the Indian and Pakistani political elites who take over the reign. The novel shows how the announcement of the partition begins reshaping negatively the centuries-old communal harmony along the line of the freshly imposed decision. Lala Kanshi Ram's anxiety is genuine, as the hasty commandment poses an existential threat, and this unprecedented incident in the subcontinent causes a feeling of paranoia and foreboding. Never had such occurrences happened in the known past; therefore, the common people remained unprepared for the impending catastrophe.

Azadi shows how national politics percolate into the calm and peaceful small cities, and its ripples are felt in the adjoining rural areas as well. The members of the Muslim League eagerly wait for the decision on Partition in their favour, and with the announcement by Mountbatten, the fringe elements are unleashed in connivance with the local administration, police, and political system. The Muslim mob's drumbeating with sinister cries signals the approaching tension and poses a threat to other minorities. The mob's pressure to open the gate of the lane of Hindu Mohalla indicates that they have been assured and motivated to take possession of the houses of minorities by looting and setting them on fire. Even the role and actions of the city police inspector Inayat-Ullah Khan change as he becomes complicit with the procession. It demonstrates how the Inspector symbolises the moral collapse of state machinery and institutional betrayal. Claiming land and resources through looting and murder in the name of nationalism becomes a prime motive of the miscreants in newly formed India and Pakistan, and the local political parties participate as active agents of violence. The rumours of riots on the other side of the border further fuel the volatile climate with more bitterness and enmity. Madness prevails over the subcontinent, leaving the minorities susceptible to armed goondas. But contrary to the increasingly tense atmosphere of the city, the intimacy between the families of Chaudari Bakar Ali and Lala Kanshi Ram defies all such faultlines and the deterioration of trust between their respective communities. The Deputy Commissioner Prem Nath Chaddha and the Superintendent of Police, Asghar Ahamad Siddiqui, serve as symbols of rationality, as they are foreign returnees who understand the importance of impartial and fair policing in the subcontinent. Unfortunately, however, they are transferred after a short period of time, leaving the city to descend into madness and lawlessness. It highlights how the Chaudhari family represents genuine human warmth and communal harmony, transcending rabid fanaticism and offering a counter-narrative to increasing bigotry. He remains a true friend, companion, and guide throughout the difficult times. Arun and Nur's romantic relationship in college reflects the pre-Partition cultural synthesis of Punjab. Their conversations foreground their awareness of the consequences of their interfaith love, but Arun shows his

flexibility and modernism by submitting himself to her. The melancholic mood of Sialkot under extreme polarisation and radicalisation ultimately destroys the organic syncretism between communities, but the feeling of pure love remains enshrined in the hearts of the lovers. It emphasises that the entire community cannot be blamed, as educated and well-meaning Muslims help Hindus escape safely from the violence. The Lala family is protected by Chaudhari's prompt and timely warning that the family is the next target of the rioters that night. A military truck arrives to ferry them to a safe refugee camp. Before this event, Lala Kanshi Ram appreciates the Britishers and takes Arun to the Hurrah Parade Ground so that his son can also learn their ways and get acquainted with them. Some of the officers know him, as they come to his shop, and he proudly entertains them. Their fairness and integrity are commendable in his eyes. His faith in and submission to them make him feel safe and secure, but when he hears the news of Partition, he blames them for betraying him, and instantly his appreciation for them turns into criticism. He says, "If today the man in the street feels insecure and if the government is powerless to protect his life and property, I hold the English responsible for that crime" (Azadi 141). Davidson, a British Army officer, offers support when requested by sending trucks to take Lala and his neighbours to a safe refugee camp, as, according to Chaudhari Bakar, Muslims could no longer be trusted. This entire arrangement is made by Munir, the son of Chaudhari. This Muslim family sets an example of humanity and kindness during this highly polarised period. Lala's anger at Davidson highlights his feeling of disillusionment with British colonial rule. After their departure, the entire locality was plundered and set on fire. The novel corroborates the claims made by historian Gyanendra Pandey that "In the rural areas attacks were launched by large mobs of Muslim peasants who banded together from several hamlets and villages to destroy and loot Sikh and Hindu shops and houses in their area. In some areas . … savagery was carried to an extreme degree and men, women and children were hacked or beaten to death, if not burned in their houses" (Pandey 23).

The paper underlines how the idea of leaving home for refugee camps is cataclysmic, as the loss of one's ancestral place is not only a loss of property but also a loss of identity, protection, and meaning. Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan become refugees in no time and are forced to migrate to remote and unfamiliar spaces. Resources, property, and power take centre stage for rioters and the local government and administration, bringing an end to values and kindness. The painful experience of losing one's home is traumatic, especially for women, because the home represents safety, dignity, and emotional attachment. Partition forces them to abandon their belongings and surroundings, leaving their bodies to be sites of Partition's horrors. The bestiality and barbarism of the mob prevail over rationality and humanity, leading to unimaginable crimes like abduction, rape, murder, and the naked parade of women irrespective of their ages. It highlights how minorities were subjected to "mass killing or organised killing" (Azadi 125). This is the most horrific and indelible blot on the name of humanity. It also demonstrates how women's suffering is one of the most harrowing dimensions of the narrative. Women in general were illiterate and remained unaware of the ongoing politics and nationalist dialogue during this time. Performing household duties, raising children, and looking after family members were their only objectives in the patriarchal family setup. Lala Kanshi Ram's attempt to educate his wife indicates that middle-class families were beginning to value education for women for their intellectual upliftment. Prabha Rani's reluctance to learn and her pretence of being inquisitive highlight how women were settled in their protective world. All the women in the city, irrespective of their religion or caste, always felt safe and protected to a great extent; therefore, their exchange of shared knowledge and experiences about their own female world brought them closer to one another. The portrayal of Prabha Rani, Isher Kaur, Bibi Amar Vati and Sunanda after Partition brings to the fore what independence offered to them "in times of social turmoil" (George 148). Gendered violence devastated and psychologically traumatised women, while the insensitivity of the government left them exposed to the torture and oppression that lay ahead. Bhalla finds that such fictional works are "marked by a sense of rage and hopelessness" (1999, xxx). Urvashi Butalia writes in her book *The Other Side of Silence* that the Partition of India cannot be understood solely through official histories, political negotiations, and the creation of national boundaries; it must also be understood through the silenced, personal experiences of those who lived through it, particularly women and other marginalised groups. "About 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own" (Butalia 3). Sunanda, the wife of Mr Prakash is abducted by Captain Rahmat Ullah Khan, who was in charge of the refugee camps outside Sialkot.The Her abduction underscores the patriarchal psyche combined with fanaticism. Some military officers we are found involved in outraging the modesty of women, and supporting local goondas to abduct women and loot the Hindu and Sikhs. Menon and Bhasin's book on the Partition of India, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* argues that women were not merely victims of Partition; their bodies, identities, and

lives also became sites through which national, religious, and communal identities were defined and negotiated:

> "Country, Community. Religion. Freedom itself: a closer examination of what meaning they have for women has led feminists to ask searching questions about women's asymmetrical relationship to nationality and citizenship; and to appreciate the role assigned to them in any renegotiation of identities, whether ethnic, communal or national. Such an analysis of the experience of abducted women, for instance, sheds light not only on the Indian state and its articulation of its role and responsibilities vis-a`-vis its female citizens, but also on its perception of its role vis-a`-vis Pakistan, Hindu and Muslim communities, and displaced Hindu families" (Menon and Bhasin 20–21).

The novel presents a realistic and poignant picture of the time through fictional portrayal. Some families could not bear to leave their homes and ended their lives by committing suicide; some could not undertake the long journey on foot and surrendered halfway. The physical pain and psychological trauma shattered them, but they continued moving for many weeks in the hope of reaching a new land, as promised by the political discourse surrounding Partition. In her book *Remnant of Partition*, Archana Malhotra finds that "Apart from a physical displacement, there would have been a traumatic mental displacement, a sudden uprootedness, an unlearning and relearning of identity" (Malhotra 8). When they crossed the border and set foot in the country that now belonged to them, a new ordeal began as they became a burden and responsibility for India. Lala Kanshi Ram had some relatives in Amritsar, and they "knocked at their doors, but discovered they were not welcome" (Azadi 325). It highlights how they left everything behind and moved forward with hope, only to find themselves a burden on the country assigned to them. "History of the 1947 Partition is a history of borders in which the geographical borders drawn to separate and establish the independent nations of India and Pakistan are at once a concretely historical division and an incomprehensible site of trauma" (Yusin 453). The indifference of the Indian government towards refugees like Lala Kanshi Ram compounded their sufferings. Chaos and disorder prevailed everywhere. Some kind people helped them by distributing food and other necessities. Lala Kanshi Ram travelled with his remaining neighbours to Delhi, as no other place or city welcomed them or offered them any opportunity for subsistence. The concluding part of *Azadi* foregrounds how a majority of the refugees who came to India late faced severe marginalisation. It shows that merely crossing border does not automatically guarantee safety or establish a sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* demonstrates that the dream of freedom from colonial power does not materialise as it was supposed to. It highlights how independence descends with the horrors of Partition, displacing millions from both sides of the newly drawn border. The small town of Sialkot becomes a prototype of national politics, highlighting how the drawing of borders transforms familiar places into sites of fear and displacement. The chaos that prevailed in the subcontinent put the existence of minority communities in an extreme crisis. The novel underscores how gullible youth from Hindu and Muslim communities turned into deadly goonda elements, unleashing unimaginable destruction by indulging in plunder, arson, abduction, rape, and murder. The paper argues that the achievement of freedom was a paradox, as the gains were meagre and the losses immense. The starkest feature of Partition was the insensitive withdrawal of the colonial power, leaving millions to the apathy of their respective governments. *Azadi* exposes the criminal intentions of fringe groups, protected and assisted by local political parties and administrations, which permitted them to take centre stage in the theatre of Partition by inflicting unimaginable pain. The worst sufferers of Partition were women, as they were subjected to terrible gendered violence, causing permanent psychological trauma. People got uprooted from the mother land and became burden on the promised land. It challenges celebratory narratives of independence by foregrounding central paradox of political liberation and personal dispossession.

REFERENCES

[1] Bhalla, Alok. "Introduction." *Stories About the Partition of India*, edited by Alok Bhalla, HarperCollins, 1999.

[2] Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Penguin, 1998.

[3] George, Rosemary Marangoly. "(Extra)Ordinary Violence: National Literatures, Diasporic Aesthetics, and the Politics of Gender in South Asian Partition Fiction." *Signs*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2007, pp. 135–58. https://doi.org/10.1086/518371 .

[4] Jalal, Ayesha. "Nation, Reason and Religion: Punjab's Role in the Partition of India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 32, 1998, pp. 2183–90.

[5] Malhotra, Aanchal. *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*. HarperCollins, 2017.

[6] Menon, Ritu, and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Kali for Women, 1998.
[7] Nahal, Chaman. *Azadi*. Penguin, 2001.
[8] Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
[9] Prakash, Bodh. *Writing Partition: Aesthetics and Ideology in Hindi and Urdu Literature*. Pearson Education India, 2009.
[10] Yusin, J. "The Silence of Partition: Borders, Trauma, and Partition History." *Social Semiotics*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2009, pp. 453–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330903361141.