



**INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN CHAMAN NAHAL'S  
"THE CROWN AND THE LOINCLOTH"**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Historical and socio-political change in the context of the Indian freedom struggle under the leadership of Gandhi in pre and post Independence era has been a subject of major concern for the Indian English novelists. And Gandhi being the moving spirit and the guiding force of the freedom struggle occupies the central position in many of their works. Chaman Nahal's 'The Crown and the Loincloth' is the first novel of his sequel of four novels. They are based on the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi. Nahal presents Gandhi as a colossus figure who shaped the course of history of his age. 'The Crown and the Loincloth' presents the historical events of Indian freedom struggle from 1915 to 1922. The novel begins with the arrival of Gandhi from South Africa & ends with his arrest on 18th march 1922 when he was sentenced to six years of imprisonment. The plot of the novel is set against the background of village Ajitha near Amritsar in Punjab. Sunil is a major character in the novel who participates in the freedom struggle as a staunch Gandhian. The novelist highlights the events like 'Hartal', 'Rowlatt Bills', 'Jallianwala Bagh Massacre', 'Non Cooperation Movement' etc through the novel keeping Gandhi at the centre of all these activities. Chaman Nahal has handled historical and fictional elements with delicacy & prudence. He seems to be successful in projecting Gandhi and Indian Freedom Struggle within the framework of fiction.*

Historical and socio-political change in the context of the Indian freedom movement under the leadership of Gandhi, both in pre and post independence era has been a subject of major concern for the Indian English novelists. Freedom struggle was over after independence. However the nationalist movement which had dominated the life of a whole generation's historical and socio-political theme occupied the central place in the works of the major Indian novelists of this period. The post independence Indian English novelists have presented this theme in their works and Gandhi being the moving spirit and the guiding force of the freedom movement naturally occupies the central position in many of these works.

Chaman Nahal's sequel of four novels: 'The Crown and the Loincloth', 'The Salt of Life', 'The Triumph of the Tricolour' and 'Azadi' is based on the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi. It is known as Gandhi Quartlet. It is a landmark in the annals of Indian English

fiction. The novelist presents Gandhi as a colossus figure who shaped the course of history of his age. These novels present the stupendous drama of the Indian Freedom Struggle under Gandhian leadership in all its aspects. The portrayal of the formative period of the Indian history has been provided authentic support of social situations through a variety of characters through these novels.

‘The Crown and the Loincloth’ is the first volume of the Quartlet series. It presents the historical events of Indian freedom struggle from 1915 to 1922, keeping Gandhi at the centre. The novelist portrays Gandhi as a symbol of moral and spiritual strength overcoming physical odds. The plot of the novel moves around two planes – The portrayal of Gandhi with humanizing touch and the impact of Gandhian ideology to usher the socio-political and cultural regeneration of India.

The novel begins with Gandhi’s arrival from South Africa. By use of the flashback technique the major events are associated with Gandhi’s social & political activities in South Africa. They provide the readers the chronological growth of Gandhi as a spiritual & ideal political leader. The novelist highlights Gandhi’s views & attitudes through various experiments like – his vows not to use salt, not to drink milk, tea and the observance of celibacy etc. The plot of the novel is set against the background of village Ajitha, located near Amritsar in Punjab. Thakur Shanti Nath is the landlord of the village. He owns a large family of four sons and four daughters - all married except the youngest daughter Shyama. The main business of the family is agriculture based money lending; hence it is suffering from the impact of Gandhian movement. Sunil, the fourth son of Thakur Shanti Nath and his newly married wife Kusum are more conscious of the Congress activities and other political cross-currents of the time than the other members of the family. Rakesh, another young man is an Anarchist. He is disbeliever in Gandhian principles. His mission is to throw the British out of India. He has secret love affair with Shyama.

Sunil is a major character presented by Nahal who participates in the freedom struggle as a Gandhian both in thought as well as in action. The changing political situation of the country is indicated through Sunil who informs Kusum about Gandhiji and ‘Hartal’. On the call of Gandhiji there was a complete Hartal observed on 6<sup>th</sup> April. It was observed against the ‘Rowlatt Bills’. Hartal was observed even in Amritsar. “All shops were shut; the government offices closed since no one showed up, business was at standstill (55). The rocklike solidarity and perfect communal harmony displayed by the people left the Sahibs and officers on horseback completely humiliated, absolutely giving them no excuse to attack. It is birth of a new era” (56)

The historical event of 13<sup>th</sup> April 1919 which shook the whole of India politically is highlighted by the novelist – Sir Michael O’Dwyer, the Governor of Punjab, Lord Chelmsford, Viceroy, Brig. Gen. Dyer, In-charge of the Martial law, along with other British personnel of the period are introduced as the characters. Gen. Dyer and Mr. Kenneth Ashby, the Assistant Commissioner of Amritsar have been given detailed portrayal of their characters. Dyer has a cruel plan to perform in respect of the Jallianwala Bagh meeting. He does feel comfortable with Mr. Ashby who is a lover of India and its people. The Governor has given away a free hand. However Dyer is unable to accept the Viceroy’s soft treatment given to the Indian leaders. His complaint is that the governments’ conduct is smooth with the political leaders. Mr. Ashby tries to convince the General that punitive action is



unnecessary. Nevertheless Dyer is unable to believe that the crowd is in town for another reason. He considered the crowd at the Bagh to be the same which participated in hartal. In his opinion the Indians have scheming, plotting minds and are never a law-abiding community. The drill practice for firing reveals his psychic imbalance. He instructs for “directing the fire at places where the mob is thickest”(82). He has never been happier in his life than getting this opportunity to ‘slaughter’ the Indians. He was the very incarnation of cruelty. General Dyer considers Gandhi ‘the arch villain’ & trouble maker. He views Gandhi’s efforts to create Hindu-Muslim unity as fraud. Dyer looks at Gandhi as a person who dramatizes everything as self-appointed custodian of the affairs. Even he satirises Gandhian theory of non-violence. According to Dyer, human beings have basically violent instincts. He thinks that the methods of Gandhi have failed as the hartal degenerated in violence at many places in the country. He is a sore that “the government did not allow Gandhi to come to Punjab otherwise he would have finished him off with his own hands” (93). Thus Dyer’s observations on Gandhi present the typical British official outlook on the activities of the great man.

The details of the activities of Gandhi from his arrival from South Africa to the Congress session in Amritsar are presented in a biographical mode. Gandhi’s extensive travel in the country getting acquainted with the masses and their situations, his personal experience of poverty in states like Bihar (sharing clothes to go out) and Andhra, snubbing of Maharajas for their ostentations display of extravaganza in the inaugural function of the BHU, have been mentioned. However Gandhi seethed with indignation after the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. It ...”had killed Gandhi’s faith in Englishmen” (137). There were protests throughout India over what had happened in the Punjab and a new system of fighting with them was evolved. The weapons like Non-cooperation & Satyagraha were found.

“Non-cooperation, no more loyalty to this government, no more allegiance..... He would ask the lawyers to come out of their courts, teachers to come out of their schools, legislators to boycott the assemblies. And most of all, he would ask them to go Swadeshi”(141). The year 1921 is termed as ‘a year of reckoning for all Indians’. The visit of Prince Wales begins and it was “time to show the mighty Crown the strength that lay in a flimsy loincloth”(179). The scene of the novel then takes us to Amritsar & amidst the shouts of ‘Bharat Mata Ki Jai’, ‘Swadeshi Zindabad’ and ‘Foreign goods Murdabad’. Here we read the description of the bonfire of foreign clothes. For the first time the Indian women had also come out of their homes to protest against the government and the police were at a fix how to tackle with the situation. Celia Ashby, the aunt of Kenneth Ashby wonders to see the remarkable self-discipline shown by the Satyagrahis. In the beginning of the part III, the novelist presents an objective evaluation of the major events like The Montague Chelmsford Reforms, The Rowlatt Acts, The visits of the Duke of Connaught and the Prince of Wales in the context of their political significance of the freedom struggle.

There was an eruption after the adoption of the Non-cooperation resolution. About thirty thousand people were put behind the bars including Pandit Motilal Nehru & Jawaharlal Nehru. The masses turned violent & there riots all over the country. The greatest shocking news came from Chauri Chaura where “Twenty two policemen had perished in the encounter” (366) with the Congress volunteers. The incident was a last straw as to Gandhi “Everything clearly pointed to a lack restraint, lack of self control...” (366). Gandhi suspended the Non-cooperation movement. The AICC endorsed Gandhi’s decision to

suspend the Non-cooperation movement. Gandhi's opposition had numerous directions. The questions were asked whether Gandhi as an individual was more important than the National Organization itself as urgent as the political struggle. However, the Congress ultimately endorsed his resolution 'out of regard for him' (405). Gandhi was still firm about 'irreducible minimum' which meant nothing exaggerated in the placing the demands to the government. Gandhi was happy to have succeeded in making the Congress a body of the masses. He also planned that before the next Non-cooperation movement the people must learn to be free from their fear. Gandhi was arrested on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1922 and sentenced to six years imprisonment.

Thus, we find that Nahal in this novel has handled both historical and fictional elements with delicacy and prudence. He is successful in projecting Gandhi and the Indian freedom struggle within the framework of a fiction. And the novelist in its setting needs to add some imaginative qualities even in historical characters in order to accommodate them in the organic growth of the work. As a novelist he is not supposed to keep a mere record of history, but he needs to create and to reveal the hidden life at its source. In the course of his portrayal of Gandhi and other historical characters, Nahal has used various techniques like focusing on the personal details, touching the humanistic side, making them interact with the fictional characters etc. He has added imaginative elements in them maintaining the historical accuracy. The fictional characters like Shanti Nath, Sunil, Sukhbir, Shyama, Rehana etc. have been portrayed meticulously to fit in the texture of the historical part of the novel. Thus we can say that Chaman Nahal's 'The Crown and the Loincloth' is a fine fictional product of the Post Independence Indian writing in English.

## WORKS CITED

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