



IN THE BEGINNING IS THE END IN THE END IS THE BEGINNING CHAMAN NAHAL'S *MY TRUE FACES*

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*I am the Self, O Guḍākeśa, seated in the hearts of all creatures.
I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings.*

The Bhagavad-Gita

As D.R. Sharma rightly 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.²

My True Faces is Chaman Nahal's first novel. The title, which clinches the basic theme, 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."³ Every human being is one of the faces of the Lord, but they should strive to be one of His "true" faces, in other words, try to be true to Him and true to themselves.

The novel 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."⁴ 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 incident in another novel by Chaman Nahal, *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).

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 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 fulfillment. 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. She is 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, Kamal is with his mami and her son, Mukut, discussing with them his strained relationship with Malti. We come to know the reason for the differences between Kamal and Malti: Kamal represents tradition and Malti exemplifies 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. The present situation is the result of marriage between a sensitive young man and an educated self-willed working woman.

Kamal's problem 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 on the other. Thus the novel presents a conflict 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. 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.

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. 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.⁵*

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 their 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) and “I used to be as free as a bird and you’ve clipped my wings” (71).



In any society, especially in Indian society, the family background of an individual influences their 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. 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. Now, to his horror, Kamal realizes that she has done what she threatened to do, and 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. 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 Karni is the next woman Kamal meets. She seems to be a mature person in analyzing people and situations. Miss Karni often 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. When Miss Karni 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.

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 confrontation between the two families is called “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 the 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.

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 sign of regret, Kamal decides to abandon her and regain his individual dignity. 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 the 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).

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