

Humanistic Concern in the Novels of Chaman Nahal

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ABSTRACT

*Humanism is a fairly new name for a very old philosophy. The basic principles of humanism – skepticism of supernatural claims and an emphasis on living a fulfilling and ethical life without religion – have been embraced by a wide variety of thinkers in different cultures for thousands of years. But not until the twentieth century did the word ‘humanism’ become the common term for this worldview. Chaman Nahal describes both pain and pleasure during the attainment of freedom of India in 1947. When India was free from the clutches of the British rule, it was a time of triumph, an occasion of rejoice and celebration, but what followed after it was the worst and shameful act that went into the pages of the history books to be read with remorse. Chaman Nahal’s first novel **My True Faces** (1973) deals, as the title suggests, with the various faces that the people bear in life. Naturally, this novel has a philosophical orientation. Every human being, whatever his status and station in life, is one of the faces of the Lord. So every human being irrespective of his age, colour, or any other distinction, should attempt to be true to his ‘face’ – true to himself and true to God – “having the ability to change within the context of his identity.” The influence of Mahatma Gandhi on Chaman Nahal’s humanism was pretty obvious and apparent. Among the better-known Indian literary humanists honourable mention must be made of Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh and Mulk Raj Anand. Although there are humanistic references in all the novels of Chaman Nahal his humanism is better reflected in **The English Queens**.*

Key Words: *Humanism, Skepticism, Philosophy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Fiction, being the most powerful form of literary expression today, has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English literature. It is generally agreed that the novel is the most suitable literary form for the exploration of experiences and ideas in the context of our time, and Indian English fiction occupies its proper place in the field of literature. There are critics and commentators in England and America who appreciate Indian English novels. Prof. M. K. Naik remarks: —One of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was probably a fountain head of storytelling;

Chaman Nahal was born in Sialkot, (formerly in India, now in Pakistan). He educated at the University of Delhi and the University of Nottingham. Since 1949, he went about teaching in many universities across India. **My True Faces**, his first novel, was followed in 1975 by **Azadi**, which is regarded as his best. His other novels, which are noted for realistic writing with lot of emphasis on the Indian middle classes, include **My true Faces** (1973), **Into Another Dawn** (1977) and **The English Queens** (1979), **The Crown and the Loincloth** (1981),

Sunrise in Fiji. Chaman Nahal is an award-winning Indian novelist. His work, *Azadi* was considered as a very fine work of fiction. The novel is a riveting narrative of the conflict-ridden effects of Partition in 1947. His other novels, which are noted for realistic writing with lot of emphasis on the Indian middle classes, include *Into Another Dawn* (1977) and *The English Queens* (1979). Chaman Nahal's writings are known to talk about India without any touch of exoticism. So his works do not portray India as a land of maharajahs, tigers and snake charmers.

Among the Indians of the modern times Mahatma Gandhi remains one of the greatest humanists of the world. Gandhi's great contribution to humanism consists in conceiving a religion that centres almost wholly around man and his life here in this world. Religion, according to him, should pervade all our activities, it cannot and ought not to be pursued in seclusion from one's fellow beings and in separation from life's other activities. The equivalent for Religion is 'Dharma' in Sanskrit which means moral obligation and connotes individual's integrity as well as social Solidarity. Gandhi understood religion completely from that point of view. His Humanism is integral, discussing all the aspects of human life and has rationalist attitudes which differ from Romantic Humanism as well as Radical Humanism and yet synthesizes the two.

The influence of Mahatma Gandhi on Chaman Nahal's humanism was pretty obvious and apparent. Among the better-known Indian literary humanists honourable mention must be made of Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh and Mulk Raj Anand. Although there are humanistic references in all the novels of Chaman Nahal his humanism is better reflected in *The English Queens*. In this novel he speaks about the 'bastis' that have sprung up in almost every locality of Delhi. The situation in other metropolitan towns in India is akin to that of Delhi in this regard. In every town, great or small, we can see 'jhuggis' and 'jhopris' standing cheek by jowl with palatial and grand houses. In *The English Queens* Chaman Nahal speaks of the 'JJ bastis' (Jhuggi-jhopari bastis). In Hindi these are the two words that are used to describe such 'bastis' – 'jhuggi' and 'jhopari'. It is difficult to say which of these two words is "more demeaning and belittling." [1] The novelist asserts that there are two types of such 'bastis' that one can encounter in such places. One type of 'bastis' are those that can be encountered in Indian movies only; such 'bastis' do not exist in fact. The other type of 'jhuggis' can be encountered in every big city. The characteristic of movie 'jhuggis' is that they are invariably – almost forty or fifty in number – situated in a valley with gently sloping hills in all directions where the male inhabitants and the owners of the 'jhuggis' are invariably poor but "every girl living in them is a beauty and every youth a Romeo." [2] Though the 'jhuggiwalas' are supposed to be farm workers though hardly any of them is shown doing any meaningful activity. Almost always near a 'jhuggi basti' is a dak-bungalow where either the hero or the heroine – but never together – of the movie is shown to be staying and he or she is fabulously rich and affluent. One of them is staying there and the other lives in the 'jhuggibasti.' They have recently declared love towards each other and naturally they are in extravagantly romantic temper. On the day the two declare love towards each other the residents of the 'jhuggi basti' are also shown in a very happy mood. In the sky the clouds are spread all over and the breeze that day is especially exciting. Because of the weather and the temper of the people everyone is happy and gay. The people decided to organize a dance. "And as if with the touch of the magic wand, their poverty disappears and they emerge attired in gold-laced blouses and silver bangles and anklets." [3] The women

and young maidens have jasmine garlands round their hair and necks, and with drum beating and shahanais playing, they get into a crescendo of gaiety and gay abandon. And to add glamour to the scene of the movie the hero and the heroine – coming from different backgrounds – who have just declared their love arrive on the scene. They arrive there by chance; they have been neither invited nor have they known about such revelries. Since they are noble-hearted and since they are in a very romantic mood they join the dance even though the invitation given to them is very formal. The hero is at once given a pride of place while the heroine is allowed to become the chief dancer of the sequence.

But things like this do not happen in real life which this novel proposes to depict. Here the ‘jhuggis’ are situated not in idyllic surroundings – in a valley with gently sloping hills in all directions – but near the sewers and other ugly places in the cities. The people of such ‘bastis’ live in appalling poverty and want. They are forced to wear worn out and tattered clothes that are not changed for days on end. All kinds of hoodlums, unsocial elements and thugs live there. The outcastes like sweepers, cobblers, tongawallas and many such poor people also live there. The people who earn their living by vending also live there. In such ‘bastis’ “either there is a horde of emaciated children with inflated stomachs, or there are middle-aged girls of fourteen or fifteen, and middle-aged men of twenty.”[4] This description shows that because of mal-nutrition and poverty the people living here become prematurely old and emaciated.

This description leads Chaman Nahal to provide us exclusive vignettes of such god-forsaken ‘bastis’ in Delhi/ New Delhi. The novelist attempts to emphasize the fact that the situation in Bombay or Calcutta is neither better nor enviable. Such ‘bastis’ usually crop up on urban government land which has been left vacant because of ecological reasons. Such ‘bastis’ always come up almost miraculously without the authorities becoming aware of their existence. Nobody knows how such ‘bastis’ come up “as these miserable wretches are incapable of doing anything properly on their own.”[5] Every other months hundreds of men and women converge on one such place and raise a new ‘jhuggi basti.’ No amount of police or municipal force can remove these people from occupying such prime land in the heart of the town. In one case when police went to evict these people from this prime land, the men “threw stones at the police, and the women of the basti squatted bare-bottomed and urinated in their faces.”[6] And the people of such ‘bastis’ did not stop at that. They put up signboards naming the ‘basti’ as if it were a regular ‘basti’ properly approved or regularized by the concerned municipal authorities. The residents of such ‘bastis’ usurp the name of the nearest ‘posh’ colony and then add “J.J.” to the name. “They even have a JJ Colony Chanakyapuri where the diplomats live and where all embassies are located, and are thinking of going and settling on a four-acre farm the Prime Minister owns near the city.”[7] This clearly shows the audacity of such ‘jhuggi-jhopari’ dwellers.

Then Chaman Nahal informs about the immediate context of the novel. The heroine of the novel, who has decided to marry a resident of this ‘basti’ instead of a social elite, lives in the colony significantly named Bide-a-Wee Colony. This is the colony where the six English Queens live. It must be remembered that the mother of the heroine is one of these six English Queens. Even in their wildest dreams had these English Queens imagined that such a disgrace would happen to them, that “the plague would ever descend on them.”[8] This colony was

so far away from the main city and the residents could never imagine that a 'JJ' colony could ever develop in their neighbourhood.

But one fine morning in July the complexion of the neighbourhood changed for good. While the residents of the Bide-a-Wee Colony had been sleeping peacefully out of doors in their mosquito-nets and securely dreaming, a great noise greeted their ears. They heard grating noises of trucks moving, their horns honking and people shouting endlessly. A little to the south of this plush colony and a little to the east of where the shopping centre was coming up, there was a large tract of unclaimed land and here a new 'basti' was coming up. More than a hundred families had been trying to erect bamboo structures for their hutments. They were busy marking area that they said belonged to them. They also brought piles of stones and they used these to mark the boundary of each house that was to come up.

Such an activity could not have been completed silently. People were shouting at each other and open brawls could be seen. Chaman Nahal narrates vividly one such brawl. Two women had been fighting for the same piece of land. A woman, clad in tattered, pale green saree caught hold of the pigtail of another woman's hair, who wore a black blouse and a black petticoat. The latter shouted at the other woman, "How dare you walk into this enclosure? Can't you see we have already put our stones around?"[9] To this the other woman replied: "This [the stone] means nothing! I was the one who first stepped on this bit. I had gone to collect the stones, while you walked in. Let's see how you deprive me of it!"[10] The woman exchanged obscenities with one another without any sort of shame. They called each other as 'churail' and 'dian': "You are a churail. You are a dian. Your mother was a churail too. And you are a goondi, you deceive your husband."[11] Finding their women exchanging obscenities their men also came to blows. And their children too did not lag behind. It was a free for all fight; no holds were barred. No body was prepared to bring peace in the brawl, "since no one was around for that pious act."[12] Everyone was busy marking space for his own claim. People were rushing about, dumping their things, their cots, and their trunks and their water pitchers. Some people were engaged in brawls over their claims.

Chaman Nahal also takes occasion to speak about the 'politics' of such 'bastis'. He says that in India everything becomes part of the politics of the day. Everywhere leaders spring up. The same happened with this JJBasti as well. Soon was present on the scene a lean, hawkish man who claimed to be the leader of the 'basti.' He began to shout from the loudspeaker. He had also brought a truck with him which he parked on one side. But the fact is that such leaders are not interested in bringing to an end the brawls that break out in such 'bastis'; they are interested in creating general confusion from which they can reap advantage. He exhorted people to occupy the land which, in a sense, belongs rightfully to them. He becomes critical of the people in power. He asks people to occupy the land but remain peaceful and non-violent whatever the provocation. In the process the name of Mahatma Gandhi is also bandied about:

Brothers and sisters. We must remain non-violent. This land belongs to the people, and as the people you have every right to it. The father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi, taught us this. The Sarvodaya leader, Vinobaji teaches the same. His Bhoodan Movement is nothing but this. Give back to the poor, Vinobaji tells the rich,

what you once snatched from them. Only the Congress has strayed from the path the Father of the Nation set before us. While we move around on broken bicycles, our Prime Minister and our cabinet ministers travel in imported cars. They have every luxury in their homes, while we do not have the bare necessities. But if the present government has fallen from virtue, our party will restore all your rights to you. Yes, it is your land. Take as much as you like. Only do please stay non-violent. We don't want a violent revolution, unless we are driven to it.. [13]

Though nobody seemed to be listening to his words, yet he was happy that it was his party that had initially ignited the people to come to this colony and grab the land here. This is usually the way in which illegal colonies come up near every posh locality. But the speech for this leader highlights one thing – the leaders of the political party in power in government usually become self-seekers and they show complete indifference to the needs and aspirations of the people at large. This particular leader feels satisfied by creating “yet another problem for the ruling party to solve.”[14] This shows that the leaders of opposition are not responsible people; they delight in fomenting trouble for the ruling party.

One of the residents of the Bide-a-Wee Colony, Sardar Swarn Singh attempted to show sense to these land grabbers by telling them that the land belonged to the Delhi Development Authority and as such they should not occupy this land. But this sane advice fell on deaf ears. In the meantime another resident of the colony arrived there. He abused them and tried to show sense. He said: “You bloody fools, you sons of bitches. . . this is not your daddy's land, you bastards. Don't dump your things here or I'll shoot you, you scums, you scoundrels!

Chaman Nahal describes how the residents of the 'basti' attempting to bring reason to the sensibilities of the residents of the Bide-a-Wee Colony. When it becomes apparent and obvious to the residents of the 'JJ Basti' that Brigadier Chopra would not agree to the marriage of their 'son' Pradeep with his daughter Rekha, they decide to attempt physical and mental blockade of the residents of the posh colony. This action was suggested to the people by Sardar Fauja Singh, an “acknowledged patriarch of the colony.”[15] He was known as the “best desperado, and was supposed to have killed three men in brawls.”[16] He was a man of deeds and not words. His words carried great weight with the people of the 'basti.' As soon as he asked the people of the 'basti' for the physical and mental blockade of the residents of Bide-a-Wee Colony the people mounted a concerted attack. All the maids in the households of the Bide-a-Wee Colony came from this 'basti' and they started to cut visits. When the memsahibs asked them the reason they refused make any answers. They kept staring at the memsahibs rather insolently, and even showed that they felt offended by the questions raised by the memsahibs. When the questioning persisted they asked the memsahibs to make alternative arrangements as they felt reluctant to work. This knocked the bottom out of the fury of the memsahibs. By themselves the memsahibs were not able to light even a gas-oven.[17] While most of the time the maids did not come to work and even when they did they performed very shoddy work. “All this drove the memsahibs to screaming madness.”[18] The threat of the maids to strike work paid dividends to them and brought the memsahibs on their knees. The fear of doing menial work by their own hands was sufficient to silence their complaints.

However, the real blockade of the Bide-a-Wee Colony started when the men folk started to drive their animal hordes through the gardens and lawns of the Bide-a-Wee Colony. In India people belonging to different communities keep different types of animals. Since the residents of the “JJ Basti” came from different communities they have various types of animals that needed grazing. Chaman Nahal recounts: “Each kind was owned by a specific tribal group or caste. The cows and the water buffalos were owned by the gujars. The sheep and the goats by the butchers. The horses by the tongawallahs. The camels and the asses by the kumhars, the people who rent these animals out for transportation purposes. And the pigs by the sweepers,”[19] Earlier these animals were left to graze in the open but now they were left in the lawns and backyards of the post houses. Now these people were able to get “cheap excitement at the expense of men and women who knew only how to insult them.”[20]

The next expedient employed by Sardar Fauja Singh to harass the people of the Bide-a-Wee Colony was never allow the people of the locality peaceful sleep. They started to blare loudspeakers with amplifiers in the ‘basti’ temple and played it at full blast at night. This they did not one night but night after night the same trick was employed, Each night as soon as the residents of the Bide-a-Wee Colony put off their lights and prepared to rest and sleep, the amplifiers started the mischief. Soon the residents of the Bide-a-Wee Colony were able to understand the real cause of this trick. Finally, it was resolved that Brigadier Chopra should be persuaded to accept the marriage of Rekha with Pradeep. Till the time this marriage was not confirmed the JJBasti group continued to harass the people of this posh locality. Thus the ‘basti’ people were able to have their poor child married to a girl of an aristocratic family. All this shows that Chaman Nahal did not make any difference between the rich and the poor, the haves and have-nots. He wanted to bring about social changes so that humanism could prevail.

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[1] P. 18

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[10] Ibid. P. 20

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid. PP. 20-21

[14] Ibid. P. 21

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid. P. 22

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

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