

Trauma Of An Alienated Self And Human Existence In Chaman Nahal's Sunrise In Fiji

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This paper aims to highlight how Chaman Nahal's Sunrise in Fiji, which focusses on contemporary India, highlights the alienated self and human existence in a supposedly developing nation. The novel is about both the individual and society. The protagonist, Harivansh Batra, starts off in a small, traditional Punjabi town before progressively moving to a more modern life as a prosperous architect and builder. This comes with its own set of challenges, including a constant yearning for a sense of complete contentment. He inevitably looks for the truth. He engages in deep self-reflection, searches frantically for a solution to his seemingly pointless existence, and never misses a chance to get closer to the truth. In the end, he understands that true happiness in life can only be found by sincere friendship. He, an Indian traveller visiting Fiji, suffers from several issues, including a feeling of isolation, because of his alienation. The alienation of Fijian immigrants is not this. The story also heavily emphasises the highs and lows of his life. Individuals seeking purpose in life delves deeply into Nahal's depiction of the individual and his struggles with family, community, and the country.

Keywords:Individual, Alienation, Life, Self, Society.

Introduction

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Chaman Nahal is a fascinating and prolific Indian English novelist who draws on his personal experiences as well as his understanding of others around him. His writing about India devoid of exoticism and his rigorous avoidance of stereotypes are what set him apart. His opinions on the nature and intent of fiction are clear: A novel needs to serve a societal function. He asserts that a novel must have “synchronic relevance,” concentrate on “specific humanism,” and address “a specific community, a specific class, and a specific society” since a contemporary creative writer cannot overlook the economic and social realities of daily existence. The socioeconomic issues facing modern Indian society are the main subject of his works.

In Sunrise in Fiji, Harivansh Batra is a prosperous builder and architect. The narrative follows his life as it documents the societal rise in materialism and the slow decline in spirituality. He is secular, rationalistic, and unsentimental; he does not care about the “religious shit” and “metaphysical dung” (82) that are a part of Indian philosophy. The inner workings of this

exceptionally successful man's mind are examined in the novel. It seems that he has everything that a person could ever want. However, he believes that all he has been doing is playing "games of being bored" (80). The world in which he lives is desensitised. When he calls his fellow humans "the stinking humanity," (22) he appears to have turned into a misanthrope. Harivansh chooses to flee this dishonest environment in pursuit of the illusive truth. Feeling emotionally spent, he decides to travel to Fiji to reflect and reevaluate his life's purpose. He arranges his travels so that he might understand what lies at the end of the queue and determine whether there is anything in human life that exists outside of the body. Thus, the work explores the intricacies of human existence and the illusive truth. This is demonstrated in the novel by Harivansh's life and death, whose restlessness and agitation "continue till he recovers contact with the spiritual elements of life" (Venkata Reddy's "The Novelist as Affirmationist," 169). Harivansh has constructed a lot of homes, but he hasn't been able to construct one for himself: "Why had his own life brought him no peace, why had his own home remained unfinished?" (19). Even marriage, in his opinion, is the union of two bodies devoid of any genuine feelings. Marriage is not for emotional fulfilment; it is just for physical pleasure. Throughout his 45 years of life, he has always placed more value on the body and mind than on the heart. For him, life has been a pointless routine for all these years.

The Harivansh narrative poses a query and provides an answer. The issue is human happiness and why people still feel lonely and unsatisfied despite the physical pleasures offered by contemporary consumer societies, which satisfy all their physical needs and desires. His life is unhappy due to his lack of mental tranquillity. But in Harivansh's case, a critical examination of his life transforms him from a ruthless materialist into a compassionate and understanding person. Harivansh hails from Sonipat, a tiny Punjabi town. He has gained success and fortune, travels much on business trips overseas, and believes he is fully assimilated into the modern, sophisticated society. But because he is both uprooted from the past and not entirely assimilated into the present, he leads an uneasy life. He is surrounded by a sense of failure and is an incomplete guy. He discovers the reality of life towards the novel's end; thus, we could say that his journey goes from boredom to a sense of achievement.

Nahal claims that loneliness is the central theme of *Sunrise in Fiji* in an interview with Sudhakar Ratnakar Jamkhandi. According to him, the novel alludes to "the leap into the unknown that occurs when you travel to a foreign nation" (42). It is fascinating to notice that loneliness is not limited to Fiji for Harivansh. He even travels to Fiji to discover the cause of his loneliness. Nahal himself supports this opinion when he claims that the themes of individual pride, individual integrity, individual loneliness, and individual grief are among the main topics in his novels.

Even though he frequently finds himself amid a sea of people, Harivansh is unable to break free from his loneliness because he has put up barriers around himself and neither tries nor permits anyone else to do so. Only at the novel's end does Harivansh come to understand the value of friendship, which enables one to overcome loneliness and form a deep and meaningful bond. There are eleven chapters in *Sunrise in Fiji*, each having a fitting title. An epigraph from a poem by Nahal's daughter, Anita Nahal Arya, is also included in the novel:

Stares a crowd of eyes
At a single beam,
An orange spot of hope

In an ocean of fury.

The novel's theme - people seeking the truth about life and living as real humans rather than robots - is summed up in the four words. The verse also implies that there is a glimmer of hope that leads to fulfilment if one is eager to learn the truth and makes a sincere attempt to find it. The opening line of the novel is, "The prayers came only afterwards" (1). By alternating between the past and the present, the story shows us the different periods of Harivansh's life. The present and the past are so entwined that they become one. The protagonist critically examines the different occurrences in his life to determine what awaits him after passing through the dark tunnel.

In the beginning of the novel, Harivansh has led a mechanical life - one that consisted just of existing and not really living. Harivansh had taken a lot of trips. Every journey he took was for business purposes, either to solicit foreign investment or to work with a foreign builder on a local project. After disembarking, he proceeded through immigration, checked into a hotel, met his counterparts, played the customary game of gambling with them, either won or lost, and was on his way home. He did not go to any art galleries, did not see any plays or films, and did not pay any attention to the local architecture, which was directly related to his field of work.

Nevertheless, despite Harivansh's refusal to show emotion, feelings do exist in his heart and eventually come to the surface at the novel's end. When he learnt about Pratibha's marriage, it was a clear indication of this. Despite the self-pitying nature of his responses, he was regretting losing Pratibha. He picked Fiji as the location to examine his actions and transgressions; "to what use had he put these days? What had he done with the time he had available?" (11). His decision to go against time, from West to East, is an intriguing aspect. It symbolises his decision to revisit his past to evaluate himself as a forty-five-year-old man in the present: "Go to see not how well you stand in the eyes of others but in your own eyes. The gift of life was bestowed upon you. How have you interpreted the gift?" (11).

The entire novel explores the intricacies of human life; the story moves back and forth at the same time, covering in its scope the interconnected social, religious, and cultural environments of Australia, Fiji, India, and Sri Lanka without losing sight of their materialism and the ethos that results. Newspaper obituary notes contain references to death. Perhaps Harivansh is more critical of his life because he has a premonition of his impending death. Ironically, though, he has not managed to break free from the grip of his artificial existence. He measures his life in terms of clock hours rather than events. He "calculates" his life while flying to Fiji. His hectic routine prevented him from appreciating the beauty of life and seeing beyond his calculations. These days, Harivansh was engrossed in his computations and was unaware of the use he had made of his available time. But now that he has determined what purpose he has been working towards for so long, he chooses to focus solely on his personal life and not his business.

The life Harivansh has led over the years and the one he wishes to leave behind are both reflected in the novel. He lived in enclosed spaces, both literally and figuratively, as the chapter's title implies. "He had built so many rooms, slept, quarrelled, intrigued in so many of them, he had lost respect for them... what dens of villainies they were, these rooms" (12) suggests that he dislikes confined places because he is so tired of living in them. Harivansh remembers his encounter with a prostitute in New York when he lands in Bombay on his route to Fiji and begins looking for a boarding house. Spending time with her at a park relieved his

sense of suffocation: “Harivansh instantly understood her”(13). This female, whom he had made love to, was his real friend in arms; she shared his disgust with what transpired behind closed doors.

Using the room and the park as symbols, the novel appears to highlight the distinction between closed minds and open hearts in these two sections. The fact that Harivansh recalls washing his clothes as a youngster is another instance that demonstrates his attempts to return to his carefree youth. “...was life not really simple, if one wanted to keep it simple?” he asks himself. “Yes, if one wanted it that way, life was easy. So why had it become so difficult for him?”(15). Harivansh has not yet broken free from his mental grip, though. He briefly transforms into a philosopher upon seeing a fair on the seashore, but he quickly retreats into his shell. This demonstrates unequivocally how he has always followed his intellect rather than his emotions. His thoughts in the restaurant alert us to the fact that he has started the process of seeking the truth. Colombo is the next destination on Harivansh’s quest for the truth. His disgust about life’s bodily joys is intensifying: He asks himself, “Wasn’t there anything else in human life beyond the body?”(23)

The sandal incident is very important to the storyline of the novel and, by extension, the narratives of nearly all Nahal’s works. He asserts that the foundation of any relationship, particularly a husband-wife connection, is compatibility. Harivansh discovers a nearly brand-new, abandoned sandal while strolling along the beach. He picks it up by the strap and spends a considerable amount of time searching for the child who has misplaced his sandal. He unexpectedly finds himself standing beneath the electric light. This encounter has a postscript. After gathering his sandal, the child vanishes. Harivansh then recognises that it was not a real child at all. For him, the value of the supernatural experience is self-confirmation. He now understands that if he works hard enough, he will be able to achieve his goal. The incident’s emphasis on one of the novel’s central themes - the man-woman relationship - is more important than whether the encounter is genuine or supernatural: “The two halves always met and matched, if one made a real effort” (28).

Another aspect of contemporary man that Harivansh embodies is his lack of innocence and infatuation with nothing. But he had a deep affinity with the occult as a child. He was willing to be frightened by their wrath or comforted by their love because he believed in all the gods and goddesses. The modern world has become a waste place because of this loss of innocence. He travels towards the eastern horizon, which represents rebirth and resurrection, since he wishes to leave this desolate area and return to a place of innocence. He is aware that self-realization must be sought in one’s own manner. The Buddhist monk who informs Harivansh, “You must seek your salvation by yourself,” supports this viewpoint. “What is the reason for the loss of a person’s identity as an individual?”(39) appears to be the fundamental question that the novel poses.

According to Harivansh, a person’s development as an individual appears to be significantly influenced by both society and the family. He remembers that his father, sisters, and relatives never allowed him to be himself. Although his family attempted to limit his development, he believes that “this Bombay and this England had totally mined his character” (54). He could not shake the feeling that he had made up his own misery on purpose. His mother, father, and sisters were all decent people. Only he had deduced meanings from their seemingly innocuous actions and pushed himself into a certain state.

It is important to remember that Harivansh's life was influenced by his perception of his family's treatment of him rather than by their actual motivations. Because he was affected by a society that places more value on material pleasures than on spiritual development, Harivansh lost his individuality and became a victim of circumstances: "He wanted to be free; he wanted to soar high in the sky"(48). And he was always pulled down by the body's wants. He was unsure of his own desires, even in his relationship with Pratibha. He always thought marriage was a trap and that marriage and love were two separate things. Sydney will be his next destination on his way to Fiji. The self-analysis process has started. He has the chance to contrast his feelings of boredom and loneliness with those of people from a supposedly developed and wealthy culture in Sydney.

As a reflection of his own empty life, Harivansh is worried about the lonely man in Sydney who is "holed up" in a hotel room. It conveys his understanding of the pointlessness of his own existence, a life devoid of its early pleasures, a life that is, to him, nothing more than "a meaningless negation" (86). "The truth of his own empty life stood up before him like a bared sabre, ready to stab him," (80) he says as he witnesses the guy dying of loneliness. He had raked in plenty, but all he had done was play games of loneliness and boredom. When Harivansh discusses loneliness, he generally refers to conceptual loneliness rather than actual physical loneliness. He always feels lonely, whether he is with others or by himself. Being among others has the sole benefit of preventing him from thinking about his sins.

As Harivansh considers the dying man, his fear of loneliness persists. At this juncture, he looks for ways to give life purpose. He remembers his childhood and his time spent with his mother and father. "Had a dream of his been wiped out, or had he not allowed a dream to blossom?"(86) he asks, unable to comprehend why he has lost the joy of his early existence. To have Pratibha's companionship, he chooses to get in touch with her. It is important to observe that Harivansh is more concerned in keeping Pratibha company than in offering her comfort for the loss of her husband. He sends Pratibha cables without saying anything kind, as if he is unsure of what he wants from her.

When Harivansh eventually makes it to Fiji, he finds himself captivated to Robin's mother, Rukmani, who is also "holed up." His attention is drawn to Robin's dancing movements, firm figure, and sparkling smile. His thoughts are consumed by Pratibha's thoughts. Since Harivansh's pain was equal to that of the man in Sydney, he must seek safety. He is looking for someone to confide in. He desires to be free of loneliness. Getting something valuable to live for is what he wants. For a little while, at least, Harivansh feels calmed by his talk with Rukmani. Another "holed up" individual is Rukmani. By "drawing him into the folds of her life, telling him of secrets she had withheld even from her child,"(120) Rukmani confides in Harivansh alone. She describes to him the different events in her life that shaped who she is today. One could argue that Rukmani was more sinned against than sinned. Perhaps she decides that death is the greatest option to end her misery, which frees her from being "holed up."

The existential undertone in Harivansh's portrayal is hard to overlook. Despite his intense desire for sex, Harivansh decided against having Pratibha, demonstrating that his consciousness is obviously a willing and deciding consciousness trying to figure out what he is truly looking for. When Pratibha, a widow, returns to Fiji at his invitation, it is this same awareness that forces him to decline her proposal of marriage. He looks for reasons why he

cannot let her into his life. He understands they are flimsy justifications and that the real cause is something else entirely.

Harivansh understands that his existence with Pratibha - who refers to him as “a museum piece” (163) - will not be what he had hoped for. He starts to feel conflicted and afraid. He questions whether he can be saved. He believes that at this point, there is no mercy for him. But he takes yet another existential decision when he resolves to end his life because he feels trapped, almost “holed up,” like the man in Sydney. As he remembers his talk with Rukmani, he comes to the realisation that friendship is fundamentally and incomparably more precious than love since it endures.

The novel’s past and present are so deeply entwined that they blend, giving the reader the impression that they are inseparable. The final chapter, “Prayers,” is related to the novel’s opening line, “The prayers came only afterwards” (1). We discover a transformed Harivansh in this chapter. He asks God for five things in life: “Health is my first prayer to you, Lord” (144). He prays for the world’s unborn children’s health so they can endure the upheaval of our planet. “I ask you for money in my second prayer, Lord” (147). As a pragmatic individual, Harivansh is aware that having money is necessary to live a respectable life. “Good looks are my third prayer to you, Lord” (153). His inability to achieve more in life due to his lack of good looks is one of his regrets. “Knowledge is my fourth prayer to you, Lord” (155). Although he is aware that both are essential, Harivansh values intuition over formal knowledge. “Love is my fifth and final prayer to you, Lord” (164). But after bringing up these prayers, just as Harivansh is about to commit suicide by plunging into the ocean, Rukmani’s reaffirmation of her belief in friendship pulls him back. In a vision, Rukmani tells him, “Would you change one of your prayers before you leap in?... Offer up prayers in the name of friendship rather than love. Love is infinitely less useful than friendship (169). He modifies his fifth prayer because of this assurance: “My fifth prayer to you, Lord, is not for love but for friendship” (170).

It is noteworthy to note that Nahal once created a list of comparable criteria for a happy life: friendship, knowledge, money, good appearance, and good health. Harivansh, who appears to have come to terms with himself, misses his step, tumbles amid the rocks, and perishes as he makes his way back. Despite dying accidentally, Harivansh passes away feeling fulfilled. He gets over his loneliness and is not “holed up” like the lonely man in Sydney or Rukmani. It is, for him, a new sunrise, a new dawn. Thus, the novel describes Harivansh’s life as a journey from death in life to life in death.

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