

Identity Perspective in Nayantara Sahgal's Fiction

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Abstract - The striking feature of the modern phase of Indo-Anglian novel is the contribution made by the women novelists. Though the women novelists of the early days, like Toru Dutt (*Binaca or The Young Spanish Maiden*, 1878) and Krupabai Sathinathan (*Kamala: A Story of Hindu Wife*, 1894) turned to romanticism, didacticism and sentimentalism which weakened their novels, the women novelists of the latter years offered convincing portraits of the world with an admirable awareness of the contemporary problems. Among them "the best and the most neglected is Mrs. R.P. Jhabwala, the most gifted is Karnala Markandaya, the most courageous is Nayantara Sahgal and the newest is Anita Desai." Nayantara Sahgal is a conscientious novelist whose artistic make up is much influenced by Bankimchandra Chatterji's romanticism, Rabindranath Tagore's humanism, Sarathchandra Chatterji's understanding of the human heart and Premchand's sympathy for the suffering people. She is a 'child of Gandhiji's India', who is born at a time "when India was being reborn from an incarnation of darkness into one of light." Nayantara Sahgal has published eight novels to date as well as some short stories, two volumes of Auto-biography and six books of nonfiction. Her work has been acclaimed both in India and abroad. She cannot be relegated to back seat in van of Indo-Anglian Literature.

The following novels have been selected for study.

1. *A Time To Be Happy* (1957) is the first novel of Nayantara Sahgal. It deals with the central Philosophy of karma and it can be interpreted to support two ways of life. Traditionalism remains a baffling uncertainty in this novel.
2. *The Storm In Chandigarh* (1969) studies how the novelist is concern with an India which is bewildered in its retreat from Gandhian Values. The retreat has penetrated into the personal world.
3. *The Day In Shadow* (1971) primarily deals with the struggle of young beautiful and daring Indian women trapped under the burden of a brutal divorce settlement and the agony and unhappiness she experiences in the hands of cruel and unjust male-dominated society of India
4. *Rich Like Us* (1985) studies the political imbroglio during the emergency period in 1975. This novel offers a sparingly frank account of emergency.

In this paper, an attempt is made on these four novels deal with three concerns social, political and historical which had great impact on Indian Society.

Keywords: *Feminism, Indian Society, Indo-Anglian novel, Women Novelists.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Nayantara Sahgal (born in 1927) is the second of the three daughters of Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's niece. She was brought up in a home that was the nucleus of the country's political activity. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, her illustrious mother, always walked hand in hand with her brother, Jawaharlal Nehru, and proved that women did not lag behind in their struggle for the Independence of the country. She was a, born -fighter, impatient of timidity. Nayantara Sahgal has great admiration for her father, Ranjit Pandit, and in fact she

owes her love for music and literature¹ and her Independence of Mind to her father. Nayantara Sahgal, right since her childhood, has been an ardent little hero-worshipper of Jawaharlal Nehru. In her autobiographical works, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free*, she proclaims that India is inextricably bound up with her uncle's ideal. According to her Nehru was a dreamer who struggled to realize his utopia in India. Nayantara Sahgal was drawn towards Gandhiji not only because of Jawaharlal Nehru who guided the political destiny of Nehru's family which gravitated towards Gandhiji, but also because of



Sitaram Pandit, the father of Ranjit Pandit who in many respects was Gandhiji's teacher.

Another significant feature of some of her novels is that their protagonists are imaginative extensions of their creator. In an interview Nayantara Sahgal admits, "Of the five novels I have written, only one *"The Day in Shadow"* was autobiographical i.e., based on my own life's experiences. Otherwise bits of my heroines and the other characters have been drawn from my own experience, but *The Day in Shadow* took its main theme, that of a disastrous financial settlement made at divorce, from my own situation. But it is quite clear that she tried to recreate in her novels such as *Storm in Chandigarh*, *The Day in Shadow*, *A Situation in New Delhi* and *Rich Like Us* the situations and dilemmas that she experienced in her life. But the sincere quest of the novelist which helped her to seek an averse for her personal dilemmas has larger reference to human predicament than to her personal life.

The eight novels that Nayantara Sahgal has written project the national consciousness of modern India against the backdrop of the eras of Balgangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Taken together, her first six novels, *A Time to be Happy*, *This Time of Morning*, *Storm in Chandigarh*, *The Day in Shadow*, *A Situation in New Delhi* and *Rich Like Us* seem to follow a loose chronological sequence. Politics is the forte of Nayantara Sahgal. As she is the daughter of Ranjit Pandit, a distinguished freedom fighter of Independent Movement and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, a remarkable woman who held important positions in national life as well as important assignments abroad and as she is also the 'raven eyed' niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, the lieutenant of the non-violent movement and the first Prime Minister of Independent India, politics is her background and her environment and it becomes her natural material. Nayantara Sahgal herself avows that her novels are political novels and each one of them 'represents a phase of India's development since 1947'.

A Time to be Happy (1957), her first novel, depicts the quest for identity of a young, wealthy and westernized Indian during the last phase of the freedom movement and the beginning years of Independent India. Her novel deals with the period roughly between 1932 and 1943. Like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* it also depicts the process of politicization initiated into Indian consciousness "when the first impact of Raj started bringing part of an apolitical social order within the compass of politics. *A Time to be Happy* is a submerged saga of Indian national movement under the leadership of Gandhiji, whose approach is strongly idealistic and whose social and political ideas are 'highly charged with values'. Gandhiji is not considered a mere politician as he is also a religious man in personal life. Often he is called a saint among politicians and a politician among saints.

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Mrs. Sahgal points out that the dual moral code of the patriarchal society is the reason for the incompatibility between the wife and the husband. Saroj is loyal to her husband after the marriage. But Inder, for whom the moral lapse in a man is taken for granted, thinks that he is deceived by his wife as she had a pre-marital affair, whereas she is not guilty as she has revealed it even before the marriage. This is because of the change of attitude to the whole issue of marriage and chastity. Through the portrayal of three young couples, Saroj-Inder, Jit-Mira and Vishal-Leela, Mrs. Sahgal proves that life becomes stiffened and it turns out into a vanishing search for communication when the oxygen of understanding is not there.

The Day in Shadow throws light on the new crop of belligerent politicians who outwit the past generation of honest politicians. Mrs. Sahgal makes it clear that the elder generation of politicians who have deliberately let in the present generation of self-seeking politicians have proved themselves that they are weak and gullible and that they have failed the nation. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, she portrays the void created by the death of Jawaharlal Nehru and asserts that the Indians have to re-dedicate themselves to the values for which he stands for. In it, while making an objective study of Naxalism she points out that good cannot be created by destroying and asserts that the mass movements aiming at the good of the people should have love and non-violence as its bases. *Rich Like Us*, the fictional enactment of the heinous crimes committed in the name of Emergency, traces out the further deterioration in the value system.

In *Rich Like Us* Mrs. Sahgal exposes those Indians who honour the belief that marriage is a sacrament more in breach than in observance. Mrs. Sahgal points out that the domestic world of the West has also become tumultuous and vulnerable. For her, the relationship between Nicholas and Anna in *Plans for Departure* is the ideal one. Nicholas gives his wife the freedom even to contradict him. They live like independent individuals and friends respecting each other and loving each other, rather than like the master and the chattel. She makes it clear that the sexual relationship is only a fraction of the total commitment between the husband and the wife. Mrs. Sahgal reiterates her father's view that the matrimonial harmony depends on a high degree of civilization on the part of the husband and the wife. *Rich Like Us* is dedicated by the author to the "Indo-British Experience and what its sharers have learned from each other." The novel presents altogether different perspective from that of the earlier novels. It reveals the despicable depths of degradation to which the character of the post-Independent India has fallen by the time the Emergency was imposed nearly three decades after Independence. The idealism, integrity and human dignity of the period of freedom struggle evaporated and it is replaced

by acquisitiveness, opportunism and sensuality. The ethical, moral and political protest backed by human rights gave way to the violence of political goondas.

II. CONCLUSION - A CREATIVE GENIUS

Nayantara Sahgal belongs to the tradition of humanists like Bankimchandra Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarathchandra Chatterji and Premchand who moulded the novel and made it suitable to the Indian sensibility so that it can greet its compeers in the domain of world literature. Following the footsteps of the 'Big three' — Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao - she, along with novelists like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Anita Desai, has widened the scope and range of Indo-Anglian fiction in her own way. Her major contribution to the Indo-Anglian fiction is her presentation of the political dimension of modern Indian life of the, pre-Independent era as well as the post Independent era.

Mrs. Sahgal rightly observes that religion plays an important role in the shaping of the personality of the individual as well as the stance of the country. It is at once a burden and a source of enrichment. She describes how Indians have made a travesty of religion and delineates the confusion of the common people which is the result of the dual approach to the theory of Karma in *A Time to be Happy*. She asserts that Karma should not be mistaken for fatalism. She makes it clear that passivity and action are the two diametrically opposite reactions to the theory of Karma and suggests that there is a need for positive interpretation of it. Hinduism suggests that Dharma (right action), Artha (economic and political propriety), Kama (passion) and Moksha (spiritual realization) are the purusardhas (goals of men) at the different stages of the life of every individual. She depicts the right kind of detachment that The Bhaqavadgita teaches in the portrayal of 'the narrator' in *A Time to be Happy*. In *This Time of Morning* she shows how religion is exploited for personal advantages and how pragmatists scoff at the inherent passivity in the religious people. She also exposes the sentimentality and gullibility of the people who give undue importance to trivial things. She delineates the dilemmas of the twentieth century human being in *Storm in Chandigarh*, has a religious connotation, as it is situated near Kurukshetra, the place where the dilemma of Arjuna was solved by Sri Krishna during the mighty war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in The Mahabharatha. It is in Chandigarh that Vishal Dubey understands that the duty of a Brahmin is to establish the tradition of peace, tolerance, culture and the courageous resistance to evil. He teaches Saroj and Haropal that one has to take a stand against the cruelty and the unethical behaviour however powerful they may be. The inherent passivity or the complacency of Hinduism is depicted in Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* and in Simrit in *The Day in Shadow*.

Mrs.Sahgal asserts that the doctrine of Maya that includes the doctrine of Karma is not a negation of responsibility. Raj, the protagonist of *The Day in Shadow* condemns the Hindus as they lack of avidity, the positive desire to do something positive. In the same novel, Ram Krishan points out that there is a need for redefining evil. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, Usraan Ali exposes the ambiguity of Hinduism which encourages extremism as it advocates the theory of action without attachment. In *Rich Like Us* once again she expresses her anguish as Hinduism has not defined evil. She insists on the establishment of Hinduism as a quest for the higher truth and stresses the need to conceive a working philosophy that can revitalize the nation.

In her first novels extravagance and flamboyance can be observed in her style. By the time of the writing of *A Situation in New Delhi*, she manages to procure an accurate and effective style. Her language can be succulent or supple or crisp as the situation demands; and her style is facile but flawless, fluent and intensely vivid. Her style, which is urbane and sophisticated, is distinguished because of her discipline and professional touch. "She has a perfect command over her medium which is the current Standard English in an educated Indian setting. Her novels, with their easy natural style that makes fiction blend unassumingly with reality, prove that "an elegant and graceful style has always been one of Mrs.Sahgal's major assets."

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