

New Historical Configuration in the Select Fictional Works of Nayantara Sahgal

- Anzar Ahmed

Department of English, H.N.B. Garhwal Central University, Uttarakhand

Abstract

Among the most prominent post-colonial Indian writers, Nayantara Sahgal cradled in the lap of Indian pre-colonial and post-colonial history. Due to her literary inclination and political family background Sahgal spectacted the Indian freedom struggle and unveiled it under the influence of on-going situations and circumstances. During pre-colonial era she observed that going to jail was a career for the freedom strugglers. The primary objective of this research study is to analyze Sahgal's fictional works in the perspective of new historicism. All novels of Sahgal's revolve around the pre-independence and post-independence Indian social, political, cultural and historical domains. There are some other spheres also but they are not pertinent for the present study. During the tumultuous environment, the novelist treated the entire events and incidents in its reality. From the very first novel *A Time to Be Happy* to the last novel *Mistaken Identity* we come across various Indian historical modes at different stages. For the present study theory of New Historicism is relevant and will be applied subsequently. New historicism, whose objective is to perceive intellectual history through the mirror of literature, and literature through its cultural contexts,. In this way Sahgal's works evidently reflect the contemporary Indian social and political history in its totality. One must have something innovative in his/her mind to write regarding the contemporary situations, Sahgal had abundance of stuff associated with that time about which she started writing. So, her literary texts and the novelist's background are interconnected as she was the eyewitness of the happenings and events at various levels. The writer has demystified the vast labyrinth of the twentieth century political spheres within its historical framework.

Keywords: Historicism, tumultuous environment, cultural context, interconnections, demystify

Introduction

There is sometimes a deep connection between the writer's life and his/her literary work. In the case of Nayantara Sahgal this sort of connection happen far more intimately and deeply than it visibly is. The study of the early influences on her life is of particular relevance in her case for they have helped moulding her political and social tendencies. The novelist was aware of this unique quality of influences since in her earlier stage. Sahgal's conscious awareness of the past as a sense of value and as history has influenced both her choice of genre and form. This has influenced her method of narrative technique. Several dimensions have been found in Sahgal's both fictional and non-fictional works, like East-West encounter, Postcolonial Embarrassment, Man-woman Relationships, National Consciousness, Subjugation of Power over Powerless, Women Emancipation, Incompatibility in Human Relations and vice versa. Nayantara Sahgal's association and concern with the political themes and issues of current importance have been readily recognized. Whereas most critics have treated her just, "another novelist to treat the political issues of the time, some other reviews and critics have noticed the equation of the personal and political matters together" (Sharma 268). However the diverse dimensions of novelist's achievement in invoking the political milieu wherein her novels are set to have not have been gauged, especially her perceptive analysis of the national scene, her expectedness of proved escalation of germinal trends and the creation and successful integration in her narrative of fictional characters with recognizable historical prototypes.

Historical Analysis of Select Fictions

The very first novel *A Time to Be Happy* is chronologically represents the pre-colonial situations at various stages. Events and characters are incorporated to give a complete portrayal of the Indian mode of life. As Manmohan Bhatnagar states that, "Fiction is the expression of the most intimate awareness of the environment wherein it is written." It has been found that quite a few Indian English novelists have set their narratives in the historical and political milieu, weaving the principle events and happenings therein. Sahgal's novels find the posing of similar questions in the personal lives of the characters and the political atmosphere around them. *A Time to Be Happy* is set in the immediate pre- and post-independence era. This novel has been

telling the stokes, and creates a genuine picture of that tumultuous time. Through the happenings in the lives of two minor functionaries, the Quit India Movement enters into the novel. However through the narrator, Sanad and Sohan Bhai , one become aware of all the encompassing movement launched by Gandhi to arose and awake the public.

This Time of Morning is set exactly in the post-independence India and represents the dilemma of the country passing through the different stages in the form of an independent nation. From 1947 to 1991 the condition of the nation was worse like before independence. No special reform/policies made to uplift India in social, cultural, economic, education and health sector. As we were greatly affected by the poisonous policies of British, it is true that before independence colonial powers befooled Indian public and after independence Indian political parties made Indians beggar. Nayantara Sahgal write that, “So freedom must resemble the majestic banyan tree with its roots deep in the soil, the programme was their watering and care together these made politics” (*This Time of Morning* 49). In the post-colonial phase with the growing social and economic insecurity communism reared its ugly head again. Partition stimulated a wave of communal unrest. The challenge was to address the problem of communal tension and its violence aftermath. Nayantara Sahgal’s novels brings in front of us evidently a sequential account of Indian politics from the last phase of struggle for freedom to the breakdown of democracy in mid- seventies. The novel *This Time of Morning* is set in post-independence India and it sets out to highlight the dilemma of a nation passing through the pangs of birth emergence.

The next novel *The Day in Shadow* brings out a more absolute picture of the political scenario of the sixties. In this novel the writer has set to cast her network wider than only probing the few perspectives in its totality. In *The Day in Shadow* the new breed of politicians is represented by Sumer Singh who is a man cast in an entirely different mould interested only in personal success. Each act and each relationship has validity only to the extent it effects his political career. He has been planning to enter films when the offer of a Congress ticket had turned him into a politician. In direct contrast to him is the ailing Sardar Sahib who had accepted the oil portfolio as a challenge. *The Day in Shadow* is against the backdrop of political corruption and social hypocrisy, Simrit stands out alone and separated. Her marriage to a businessman against the will of

her Brahmin parents has fallen on rocks owing boorish character of Som, her insensitive husband whose sole existence is for money, success, power and glory that accompany them. Her marriage to Som, therefore, has in the national context, freedom has brought the holocaust of Partition violence in its trials; and in the personal context of Simrit, it has carried with it the violence of divorce, a lot of emotional debris and psychological pressure. As the novelist states that, "It was painful how the connection continues, like a detached heartbeat. The tissue of marriage could be dissolved by human acts, but its anatomy went on and on" (*The Day in Shadow* 64). At the macrocosmic as well as microcosmic levels of consciousness it has meant a unique opportunity to choose and decide whether it is the matter of oil-exploration or remarriage. Both the elements are there presented in the novel been a somewhat suffocating suffering of servitude. The release is thus not joyful but dismal. In the national context, freedom has brought the holocaust of Partition violence in its trials; and in the personal context of Simrit, it has carried with it the violence of divorce, a lot of emotional debris and psychological trauma. At the macrocosmic as well as microcosmic levels of consciousness it has meant a unique opportunity to choose and decide whether it is the matter of oil-exploration or remarriage. Both the elements are there presented in the novel.

The Situation in New Delhi evidently set in sixties which captures the picture of desperation and urgency during the time. This novel truthfully represents the western attitude to democracies in the third world: the refusal to think a new, to have a deep observation of the situation and help where help was needed. *A Situation in New Delhi* presents a complex realistic picture of Delhi in post-colonial India. Sahgal lingers on the failure of political machinery in the absence of a good leader. The novel also exposes corruption and opportunism in a seemingly democratic government. In the novel *A Situation in New Delhi* the writer has tried to analyze the political situation in its reality. It goes further than any of her earlier novels in its concern for reasons and solutions. It is not particularly associated with the writer's personal experience of politics, but the happening is set in the mid-fifties. In fact the political events and happenings of two decades have been telescoped into less than half of the time. The novelist's objective is not only to expose the character and deeds of Devi and Rishad but she reveals the meaning of revolution. Through these characters she suggests the way to bring revolution in its real sense.

The contrast between the idealism of India's freedom and moral degradation of post-Nehruvian era is particularly evident in the novel *A Situation in New Delhi*. The dominant political consciousness which is the main content of Sahgal's novel is real. In *Preface to Prison and Chocolate Cake* Sahgal writes, "We grew up at a time when India was the stage of political drama and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performance we have seen" (9). In the novel *A Situation in New Delhi* Sahgal portrays the persona of Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru and emphasis that Indians need to restore the values for which he stands. Nayantara Sahgal's fictional world presents an authentic and pure picture of history.

The novelist is alarmed and horrified at the happening after India's independence. People had not accepted Gandhian philosophy of life; they were as brutal as long before. She has the conscience of a liberal and the spirit of a non-conformist. Primarily concerned with the social realities, she constructs a wider vision of the contemporary Indian political and social conditions of the independent country. The work of Sahgal, not only express the impressive segment of Indian English novel but also sums up the saga of India's struggle for freedom and the changes it has brought about in the traditional social set up in India. In the novel *A Situation in New Delhi* the focus is on political attitudes. Here the conflict of goals which is a central conflict of contemporary society is presented in a different manner. There are two types of people-one group is ruthlessly driven by the progressive urge and the other group is possessed by humanistic considerations.

Through this novel the novelist tries to show us a country caught between two worlds-the ancient and modern. Michael Calvert describes India as a "staggeringly old country old and settled structured when Britons were painting their bodies blue" (107). Sahgal has attempted an analysis of the political situation in its totality. As the title of the novel suggest that *A Situation in New Delhi* means the political situations and happenings in New Delhi which put it effects on the entire country.

Rich Like Us may be considered a historical novel. The narratives of the novel take place between post-independent India till the imposition of Emergency by Prime Minister of India in 1975. "They were so busy arresting this one and that one that they can't be bothered with common criminals like us, just say you dit it and tell your friends to hand them some moneyand they let you out" (*Rich Like Us* 216). The

tumultuous period of this era portrayed in the novel. The novel unfolds the reality of the situation through the suffering of the common masses. After independence from foreign rule it is found that most of the Indian novelists starts looking and reading every aspect of Indian life and society in various perspectives. To understand Sahgal's representation, it is first to be seen through its association with Macherey's theory of Literary Narration. This representation has been historically significant for the literary critic who has portrayed history from Plato's "mimesis" to the New Historicist "Cultural Construct." It is also important to note that Nayantara Sahgal is not seems to be under the influence of any political party of political idea but she reveals what she experienced in her life.

Nayantara Sahgal's singular-most achievement is her perception and depiction of the historical and political scenes. *Rich Like Us* further takes the story in the similar settings – here it is one month after the proclamation of Emergency. The present is to be seen through the selective filtering of the memorable past which completely different altogether. History clearly shows that the Western philosophy of individualism is applicable to only power holders or replaced in the higher ladder of hegemonic structure. This ideology of individualism proclaims that every individual has fundamental rights but through oblique means the elite suppress these rights. This suppression is camouflaged in such euphemistic terms that the suppression does not become evident. Since the subalterns have been silent, this devoid of rights never gets expressed. As long as Europe recorded history as a variation of the grand narratives, the histories of the colonies were silent. Suppression based on economics, gender and power politics have the same metaphysics. Nayantara Sahgal again and again portrays this exclusion. The harsh reality of the exclusion hits Sonali, in *Rich Like Us* during the Emergency. The identity of Indian as opposed to the colonizer was totally based on skin colour. With independence and expulsion of whites from the country, a homogenous monochromatic brown identity was not formed in the Indians because Indians comprised of shades of brown. Nayantara Sahgal has portrayed the racist tendencies of the fairest shades in her fiction.

Eventually, history made these factors catch up with postcolonial self awareness, unfortunately through civil wars in many countries of Africa and through riots and post-partition trauma in India. For the novel *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal assumes that, “Rich Like Us was the title I gave to a novel of mine in which a fizzy drink called Happyrola allies itself with local corruption and a dynastic dictatorship Europe thinks best” (*The Political Imagination* 84). As a reaction to the competition and fragmentation, Sahgal presents love affairs, friendship and familiar scenes from everyday life as evidence of fact that people of different communities can take pleasure in being together. A profound study of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal leads one to the writer’s deep concern for the future of Indian society. In the novel *Rich Like Us*, she expressed much of her concern about the abuse of power, cruelties of the system, the exploitation, lawlessness and corruption which regretfully has become a reality in modern society. Her emphases on the fact that individual make the society and therefore she created her important protagonists who are nurtured on strong abiding values that can change society for the better. The best example of this is the narrator, Sonali in *Rich Like Us*.

Partition of India has created a huge gap[in the public sensibility which still persists in the shape of communal politics and riot, instability in borders areas and all. The development and progress of the nation had been hindered for two hundred years by British intervention. They had superimposed Western culture, western progress and ideals on the Indian culture. One could not suddenly relinquish these superimposed values because they had become the foundation on which the free nation was built. At such a juncture, the attempt to retrieve the past seemed retrogressive. Moreover, the past could not fit into the present path of progress. Gandhi’s call for small-scale industries and Basic Education seemed unfit for the modern times. The only path was to follow the western stream of progress. Once the country had been swept off by colonization and now in spite of the freedom it could not resist the western current. In Africa when Gandhiji was treated brutally by white people then he realized that how Indians have been treated outside their country. In Pretoria he called a meeting of Indians and shared with them his experience. They said that they have been tolerating humiliation and insults for years because they did not know of other way. Gandhi declared that they must form an association to present their intricacies to the authorities so that it was the time to act. At the end of

stay in Africa, Gandhiji was to leave but he would stay on the request of Indians to launch a campaign against the South African government's annual tax on Indians.

Sahgal's response to the imposition of Emergency in 1975 is that it has lessened human freedom of expression. The Emergency has strangled the voice of helpless people and they had passed through the state of trauma, wherein no one could raise his voice and protest against the atrocities and everyone was kept mute and voiceless through power until some Statesmen and women like Nayantara Sahgal and some other prominent writers protested in the form of writing in news papers columns and pamphlets. "In a country where experience and ability had to be pooled and horded, the P.M. was reluctant to dispense with a colleague. A rebuke was unheard of, dismissal unknown" (*This Time of Morning* 20). The novelist observes the Indian social set up and discovered that no one in India has achieved in creating a modern Indian character. The novelist has been playing an eminent role on both the literary as well as social life construction of Indian masses. She seems in her fictional and non-fictional works under the influence of Gandhian ideology and ideals of her maternal uncle, Nehru. This sort of influence helped her in generating new ideas and views about life.

In the next novel *The Day in Shadow* a new sort of political leaders is represented by Sumer Singh who is completely different and interested only in his personal success. Each and every act and relationship has value merely to the extent it effects his political interest. There is another character Sardar Sahib whose generation has motive to fulfill the challenges of nation's progress and development whereas the generation of Sumer Singh considers power to be the only goal. Sumer Singh's position in Indian politics states that, "No Minister could be anonymous for long in Delhi and he had been using this side entrance for three months, though he had always kept his own car before and left long before morning" (*The Day in Shadow* 112). He is of the view that past has outlived its utility and is a spent force. Som and Sumer Singh, both are driven by the similar motivating attitude – an attitude of ruthless ambition. Sahgal's latest novel *A Storm in Chandigarh* may also be considered a historical novel; it delineates the political conflicts between two groups of politicians of two provinces, Punjab and Haryana.

Nayantara Sahgal's growing image and name as prominent Indian English writer is because of tremendous writings mostly concerned by and large with political, historical and social changes in India which make it oblivious that she is keen and sensitive observer and analyst. Her novels are indications of the intensity of her feelings and thinking about the contemporary political and social developments in the country. Her historical fictions portray the reality in delicate and suitable way. In *Story of Freedom Movement in India* she reveals that, "If our lives and honour are to remain at the mercy of an irresponsible executive and military, if the ordinary rights of human beings are denied to us, then all talk of reform is a mockery" (*TSIFM* 99).

Sahgal's concern with the historical and political themes and issues of current importance has been readily acknowledged. She herself states that: "Our growing up was India's growing up into political maturity – a different kind of political maturity from any world had been before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace" (*Prison and Chocolate Cake* 15). As history shows that her entire family was actively engaged in the country's struggle for independence from the foreign rule.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion and analysis of the select fictions of Nayantara Sahgal in New historical perspectives leads to some significant insights, not only of the history of India but also in making these aspects pertinent for the current issues and situations. Her works are almost distinct from the works of her contemporaries in the domain of historical configuration as she unfolds every element in her genres. Sahgal's great contribution in constructing the political history of the nation in such a way that we find the reflection of the contemporary Indian political and historical scenario which she was very close to because of her family background. The novelist associated herself to a particular situation and presents it impressively. Giving her knowledge of the world issues, she places fictional saga of Indian colonialism and pos-colonialism within the larger context of global western imperialism. Nayantara Sahgal has revealed the new historical sense through her novels and curtailed a feeling of past and awareness for the future.

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