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Fictional World of Nayantara Sahgal: A Thematic Study

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Abstract:

This present paper attempts to explain the analysis of the variety of theme in the fictional world of Nayantara Sahgal. In almost every novel, Nayantara has a central woman character who gradually moves towards an awareness of her emotional needs. Nayantara Sahgal's novels read like commentaries on the political and social turmoil that India has been facing since independence. Mrs. Sahgal's feeling for politics and her command over English are rather more impressive than her art as a novelist. She is a novelist of politics as well as a successful political columnist for different newspapers. Her writing is generally characterized by simplicity and boldness. Her writing is also famous for keeping in touch with the latest political ups and downs with a tinge of Western liberalism. Her novels truthfully mirror the contemporary Indian political theme. Her novels portray the contemporary incidents and political realities saturated with artistic and objectivity. All her major characters of the novel are drawn towards the vortex of politics. Besides politics, her fiction also focuses attention on Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. As a woman novelist, Sahgal recognizes that her primary obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of women. She has gone deep into the female psyche in her novels. She describes in her novels how woman is exploited even during the modern times by both the individuals and the society. She tried to portray the sensibility of woman that how a woman looks out at herself and her problems.

Keywords:

changing societal patterns, transformation of values, feminist approach, unjust male-dominated society, rare imaginative awareness, political liberalism, social sophistication, economic moderation, annual Commencement, the problem of political tension and violence, cultural ambivalences of the Indian tradition.

Introduction:

During almost six decades of post-colonial history of Indian English fiction, a wide variety of novelists has emerged focusing attention on a multitude of social, economic, political, religious and spiritual issues faced by three coinciding periods of human experience. With the turn of the century the Indian English women novelists have surpassed their male counterparts outnumbering them quantitatively as well as by maintaining a high standard of literary writing, equally applauded in India and abroad, experimenting boldly with not only technique but also by incorporating tabooed subject matters in their novels and short stories. In Indian novelists in English, women writers like R. P. Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati

Roy, Shobha De, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rama Mehta, Manju Kapur and Geeta Mehta have heralded new consciousness, particularly the pathetic plight of the Indian women. Through women writer's eyes, we can see a different world, with their assistance we can seek to realize the potential of human achievement. This brief survey of Indian women novelists in English clearly shows that women have made their permanent mark in the field of English fictions. The women novelists constitute a major group of the Indian writers in English. Women writers are now enjoying an increasing popularity and prestige. They have an impressive record of success. Women novelists writing in English attempt to project woman as the central figure and seem to succeed in presenting the predicament of woman most effectively. The work of women writers has given a distinct dimension to the image of woman in the family and society. In most of their writings, they have tried their best to free the female mentality from the age long control of male dominations.

Nayantara Sahgal as a woman novelist:

In almost every novel, Nayantara has a central woman character who gradually moves towards an awareness of her emotional needs. The emotional world of woman is explored and analyzed with admirable insight and sympathetic perception. Her concern for the women who are caught in the dilemma of liberty and individuality or stability and protection of marriage is understandable. She has shown an admirable understanding of the problems and the predicaments of the women and exploited their skill in projecting convincingly the agonized mind of the persecuted women. Her portrayal of women characters in the novels invariably bears authenticity to their feminist approach, outlook and perspective. Her keen observation of the life of Indian women and their interest in the study of their inner mind are evidenced by their vivid and panoramic portrayal of their plight.

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the distinguished Indo-English writers who write in the stream of national consciousness. The first generation of important women writers began publishing their work in the 1950s. During this period, Nayantara Sahgal emerged as one of the most significant voices in the realm of Indian English fiction. Nayantara Sahgal's first book *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), an autobiography, was published when she was only twenty-seven years old. The book describes the powerful associations and experiences of her childhood and provides invaluable insight into the shaping influences of her life. The political consciousness, which dominates her literary creations, is real and inseparable from herself and her surroundings. In the preface to *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, Nayantara Sahgal writes:

“We grew up at a time when India was the stage for a great political drama and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performances we have seen.⁷In the same book, she says:
Our growing up was India's growing up into political maturity — a different kind of political maturity from any the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace.”

Nayantara Sahgal was born in Allahabad on May 10, 1927 into one of India's most prominent political families. With her mother Vijayalakshmi Pandit as India's first ambassador to the U. N., her uncle Jawaharlal Nehru as India's first Prime Minister, and her first cousin, Indira Gandhi as India's third Prime Minister as well as the first woman Prime Minister of India; it is not surprising

that politics and history inspire and underlie much of her writing. She is a prolific writer. She has to her credit nine novels, two biographies, two political commentaries and a large number of articles, contributions to various newspapers and magazines. Nayantara Sahgal is the second of the three daughters of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijayalakshmi Pandit. Her childhood was spent in Anand Bhawan at Allahabad with her parents, her maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru and her cousin, Indira Gandhi. Her childhood and adolescence were spent amidst India's political reverberations, the crusade for emancipation from the British yoke and the influence of Gandhian ideas of freedom and non-violence. She has, as A. V. Krishna Rao states, "inherited and cherished a certain set of values and attitudes toward life which can be best described as a complex of political liberalism, social sophistication, economic moderation and cultural catholicity in continual interaction with the Gandhian idealism."

In her article "This Time of Fulfillment" she mentions the two turning points in her life. The first turning point was her marriage to Gautam, a businessman. The unhappy marriage ended in a divorce in 1967 which left her walked into the world fearlessly. Thus, the major theme in her works is disharmony and dissolution of marriage. The second turning point was her decision to live with a brilliant bureaucrat, E. N. Mangat Rai which she described in her own words, "not an affair but a revolution, a self discovery that life had to be lived more fully in order to be meaningful."¹⁴ Later in 1979, she married Mangat Rai, after many years of living together. Sahgal is a novelist and political commentator who has published nine novels and seven works of non-fiction. *Rich Like Us* won the Sinclair Fiction Prize and the Sahitya Academy Award. Her earlier book *Plans for Departure* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. She served as an advisor to Sahitya Academy's Board for English from 1972 to 1975. She was a member of Varghese Committee for Autonomy to Radio & TV in 1977-78. In 1978, she was a member of the Indian delegation to U. N. General Assembly. She has also held the post of Vice-President of People's Union for Civil Liberties. She received the Sinclair Prize for fiction in 1985, Sahitya Academy Award (Britain) in 1986, and Commonwealth Writers Award (Eurasia) in 1987. She was also a Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Washington from 1981 to 1982. In 1990, she was elected fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1997, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate for Literature by the University of Leeds. In 2002, Mrs. Sahgal was awarded the Alumni Achievement Award from Wellesley College. Her last novel, *Lesser Breeds*, was published in 2003. The Library of Congress currently holds twenty-four of her works. Sahgal continues to write and maintains contact with Woodstock from her home in Dehra Dun. In 2004, she spoke at the Woodstock's 75th annual Commencement, where she inspired yet another generation of students to make a difference in the world.

Sahgal is not only a novelist of repute but is also a journalist by profession. She confesses that fiction is her "abiding love", journalism her "conscience". Talking to Rama Jha in 1987, Sahgal said that her two kinds of writing experiences — that of a novelist and that of a political journalist — though contrary to each other, are mutually sustained because, her central focus in both areas is the same — the concept of freedom in human beings, national and personal, increasingly feminist. She feels that woman should try to understand and realise herself as a human being and not just as an attached to some male life. She introduces her theme of the quest for freedom through the delineation of male protagonists though she severely attacks the male dominated society.

Sahgal has so far nine novels and two autobiographies to her credit and has published a number of articles and two other books. Sahgal's novels include:

1. *A Time to be Happy* (1957)
2. *This Time of Morning* (1965)
3. *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969)
4. *The Day in Shadow* (1971)
5. *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977)
6. *Rich Like Us* (1985)
7. *Plans for Departure* (1987)
8. *Mistaken Identity* (1988)
9. *Lesser Breeds* (2003)

Her non-fiction mainly includes her two autobiographical books:

1. *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954)
2. *From Fear Set Free* (1962)

Besides a history book *Freedom Movement in India* (1970), and a political treatise *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power* (1978), besides numerous newspaper and magazine articles. Sahgal's first novel, *A Time to be Happy* has the reference to Congress activities and the events of 1942. The novel portrays the search for identity of a Westernized Indian youth and, against the backdrop of India's struggle for liberation. It is also on a different level, a submerged saga of Indian national movement with its inevitable and indelible impress on the minds of countless comfortable upper-middle class Indians. It covers a period of about 16 years from around 1932 to 1948. The central theme is the awakening of Sanad's conscience and his attempt at success in self-discovery and identity. Sahgal attempts to project a nation's consciousness through the fragmentary consciousness of an individual. Thus, while dealing with the particular, the novel also is concerned with larger issues. The novel is set in the immediate pre and post independent period, and deals with themes which are taken up by Sahgal in her later novels also. It is the story of Sanad, a nearly English Youngman brought to be a success, puzzled and uncertain about his future. Sahgal's novel, *This Time of Morning* is a purely political novel which deals with what happens in the corridors of power, in the drawing rooms of politically very important people or in the lobbies in Parliament. Some of the characters of the novel are so beautifully and symbolically portrayed that they are equated with the contemporary political personalities. Much of the action takes place in Delhi, and the particular context is the decline and fall of one of the pillars of the Government, Kalyan Sinha. *This Time of Morning* can certainly claim to be one of the best political novels written by an Indian in English. Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh* deals with the problem of political tension and violence originating from its being Chandigarh, the common capital of the two states — the Punjab and Haryana. The novel depicts violence, chaos and the uneasy political situation of the late sixties in the partition of Punjab into two newly formed states — Punjabi-speaking Punjab and Hindi-speaking Haryana with Chandigarh as the common capital. The novel deals with the political upheaval in Punjab in the post-independence period. Beside the political background, there is also a human background which has not received adequate treatment. The fictional situation of young hearts broken up by compulsions of marriage and call of new love suggests that marriage is not just sexual relationship; it means companionship on equal terms. The cause of disturbance in the relations between man and woman partly lies in man's own inherent debility to indulge in adultery and partly in the unnatural position of the husband or the wife in the family. Women characters in

the novel no more like to remain confined within the four walls of their houses. They prefer to go to picnic to relieve the burden of boredom and monotony. The clash between Gyan and Harpal is a clash of ideologies. It is a fight between the cult of violence versus the idea of non-violence. Gyan who shows little concern for emotions and human beings always indulged in a ruthless attitude. Harpal on the other hand is more concerned with human beings than with anything else. Each time there is a confrontation between the two Chief Ministers. Sahgal's novel, *The Day in Shadow* deals with the struggle of a young, beautiful and daring Indian woman 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. The novel is a fine example of the female literary tradition in Indian English literature. The Western wave of stream-of consciousness technique affected the writings of the novelist and she also plunged deep into the inner world of her characters. shows that though Indians have got freedom yet it is only on the surface level as in their attitudes to love, morality, sex, marriage, education and religion, they are still the slaves of the West. The novelist richly inspired by the political movement of the society. Though the main theme of the novel is politics, yet the problem of divorce and disintegration of the marriage in a typical Indian setting are also beautifully dealt with. Sahgal's fifth novel, *A Situation in New Delhi* depicts the aftermath of a great popular Prime Minister Shivraj, who dominated the political and national scene for a full decade. Sahgal's novel, *Rich Like Us*, presents a picture of India after Independence but shows primarily the state of affairs in the country under the Emergency imposed by her cousin, Indira Gandhi. The novel is set in the period when the Emergency was just one month old. The novel is many individual histories, and many voices in one — a vivid and compelling tapestry of India's past and present. *Rich Like Us* is a fearlessly presented account of the harassment caused to all sections of people during the period of National Emergency. It deals with the impingement of politics on the personal lives of people and studies the impact of Emergency on a vast panorama of characters. Here is a successful attempt to record history through the totality of its immediate effect on those who participate in it. The novel runs on the oddly parallel life tracks of two very different women. A time promising wealth for the corrupt, but terrifying with sterilization for the poor and jail for the critical, the Emergency changes forever the lives of both women. Sahgal's seventh novel *Plans for Departure* which has won the Eurasian Regional Award in the Commonwealth Fiction Prize registers an important stage in her growth as a novelist. The novel is both a love story and a mystery, set in a continent poised for revolution and a world on the edge of war. It is a novel of haunting power and superb craftsmanship, rich in intrigue, gentle humour and exquisite observation. With *Rich Like Us* and *Plans for Departure*, Nayantara Sahgal shows how there is a growing concern in her with the novel as expressing the collective fate of a nation releasing itself from subjugation. In *Mistaken Identity*, Sahgal frames her narrative against a turbulent period of Indian history. The novel paints the currents and cross-currents engulfing the country and other parts of the world in the first three decades of 20th century. It is a political novel imbued with socio-political events in India during the British regime in the year 1929. It was the time when the country was gradually awakening to nationalism and witnessing unrest, strikes and mass arrests. The novel is a graphic document of the twilight years of the Raj in India and may well serve as a reference point to many events and actions of the freedom movement. Sahgal had watched history in slow motion. The novel provides a glimpse into Sahgal's hawk eye for details and sound grasp of the world history. *Mistaken Identity* is a major modern novel in its theme and craft that converge on a mode of revelation characteristic of contemporary literature. It is a singularly significant novel in the Indo-English tradition as the theme of identity; it develops a unique blend of its modern Western sense with unmistakable historical and cultural ambivalences of the Indian tradition.

Sahgal's concern with the political themes and issues of current importance has been readily recognized. We may say that politics is inextricably interwoven in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal.

Sahgal's novels present an authentic picture of India before and after independence. She considers her novels political in content and intention and in her view; each of the novels more or less reflects the political era we were passing through. The use of political genre is one of the main aspects of her novels, the others being the exploration of the religious theme and the problems of women in contemporary society. Though Sahgal has been hailed chiefly as a political novelist, her feminist concern is obvious and her fighter spirit quite vocal in her fiction. In all her works, there is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. Above mentioned literary survey of women writers, Sahgal's feminist approach as well as her focus on Indian political scenario before and after independence in her novels appealed me the most to select Sahgal's fictional world for my research. I have tried to focus on Sahgal's portrayal of women characters in her novels. The portrayal of her memorable women characters and the feminist tone in her fictional discourse make Nayantara Sahgal as one of the most outstanding feminist Indian novelist writing in English.

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