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Autobiographical Elements in Nayantara Sahgal's *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *The Day in Shadow* (1971)

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Abstract:

An autobiography element is also called personal experience of a writer. It is the description of events and incidents of a person's own life and narrated by that person through imaginary character (s). It is a written account of a person a person's life in his or her own words. It is a sort of life which is reshaped by recollection and distortion by a person. An autobiographical work is subjective by nature in which a person writes about his or her journey and struggle of life in contemporary times. Many English as well as Indian writers wrote about their own personal experience of life and society at their own level. Nayantara Sahgal wrote various autobiographical non-fictional and fictional works in which she reflects her experience of politics as well as personal life. In most of her writings she has depicted her own life through various imaginary characters. The present paper is an attempt to study her non-fictional work *The Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) which is a true account of Sahgal's experience of her childhood while in her novel *The Day in Shadow* (1971) Mrs. Sahgal, has very honestly described her own post marriage personal life through various female and male characters. No doubt she has much experience of Indian politics and she has described political experience in many of her writings but apart from politics, she has mainly focused on her own married life and expressed her mental agony, tortures of divorce and dominance of male on the life of a woman particularly wife in family.

Keywords: personal experience, man, woman, society.

Introduction

It is generally believed that every writer, male or female, to some extent expresses his or her own experience through his/her writings. An autobiographical work is subjective by nature in which a person writes about his or journey and struggle of life and contemporary times. In an autobiography the writer uses words like: I, we, she and he in mostly cases. In olden days one of the greatest dramatists William Shakespeare in his famous play *The Tempest* (1611) expressed his anger, thoughts and feelings through the character of Prospero, a white magician. Many readers think that Shakespeare himself is Prospero. After that many English and Indian writers expressed their own personal life through many imaginary characters and the incidents of the contemporary times. In modern times Mahatma Gandhi wrote an autobiography *The Story of My Experiment with Truth* which was published in 1925 that covers Gandhi's life from his childhood to 1921. After Gandhi, Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru wrote an autobiographical book '*Towards Freedom*' in 1936 when he was in jail in which he tells about his life, humility and honesty which made him a statesman. Her scholar father translated Sanskrit classics: *Rajtrisingini*, *Mudra Raksha* and *Ritusambhara* from Sanskrit to English and her mother freedom fighter mother Vijay Lakshmi also wrote her autobiography *Prison Days* in which she has described her personal experience of imprisonment.

Nayantara Sahgal (1927...) is one of the best-known autobiographers in Indian writing in English. She has very realistically expressed personal childhood experience and frequent arrest of her parents and taken to jail during the struggle for freedom. She comes from the first Indian Nehru-Gandhi political family. Nayantara, as a child in her personal life at Anand Bhawan, Allahabad, now Prayagraj, was greatly influenced by her mother VijayLaksmi, her father Ranjit Sita Ram, her elder sister Chanderlekha, her younger sister Rita, her maternal uncle Pt. Nehru, her cousin India Gandhi and in her teenage she was highly influenced Mahatma Gandhi and many freedom fighters, politicians, bureaucrats and after marriage her life was greatly influence by her U.K. born husband Gautam Sahgal and after divorce by Mangat Rai, an ICS officer and later a politician whom she married twice. She has written many newspaper articles, short stories, letters non fictional works and many novels and in her mostly writings he has expressed her personal experience whether political or personal in her writings very brilliantly and skillfully through various female and male characters.

Actually, Sahgal initially started writing columns in newspapers, articles and non-fictional works and after that she began to write novels. In her mostly writings she has described her personal experience whether it was political of her family members or her own personal one and whether the experience of life before marriage or after marriage. She thinks that her childhood life was full of happiness and there was complete freedom but her marriage in with husband Gautam Sahgal brought a great change in her life. Nayantara and Gautam Sahgal got married in 1947 after her return from America. She first time realized the shocking assumptions of inequality between and woman which affects the life of a woman very badly. Her marriage made her aware all things of which she was not aware. After marriage she came to know the reality of society in which there is much inequality between man and woman. It is also worth mentioning that Ranjit Sitaram and Vijay Lakshmi Pandit had only three daughters' viz. Chanderlekha, Nayantara, and Rita whom they loved and brought up like boys in a free environment.

Autobiographical or personal experience in Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954)

Prison and Chocolate (1954) is a remarkable autobiographical non-fictional work of Nayantara Sahgal in which she has expressed her own childhood experience of happiness amid the family members. The story begins in colonial India and covers a long period of freedom struggle, frequent arrest of Pt. Nehru, her mother Vijay Lakshmi, and many freedom fighters, death of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit in 1945, assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 and first election in Indian India in 1952 and becoming of Pandit Jawahar Lal as first Prime Minister of India and Vijay Lakshmi Pandit's win in election and her subsequent becoming as the first Indian woman cabinet Minister. The description of personal experience of Nayantara starts from Anand Bhawan, Allahabad, now Prayagraj, which was the arena of political activities where many freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Azad, Sarojini Naidu and her daughter Padmaja and many others frequently visited to make the nation free from slavery. The British Govt. always kept an eye on the activities of freedom fighters, arrested them and put in jails. Sahgal shares her personal political experience as she writes:

A home where politics is the dominating influence is the scene of unusual events. The atmosphere at home was quite normal despite all such unusual events. (P. 18)

Sahgal describes her happy and free childhood memories and political experience in a very realistic manner when she was a little child of mere three years old at Anand Bhawan (abode of peace), a very big house, how she with her two sisters Chanderlekha and Rita used to play and how they were looked after by Nanima, Bibima and life was very happy. She expresses her childhood experience as she writes:

We had chocolate cakes for tea. It was a treat because ordinarily we had bread and butter. It was rich and dark cake, chocolates through and through, with chocolates swirls on top. (P. 20)

But this happy moment suddenly changes into unhappiness when suddenly in the morning when they were taking tea suddenly police came and arrested of her father whom the writers call 'Bapu'. The elder daughter Chanderlekha asks her mother Vijay Lakshmi why police have come and the mother tells the little daughter the purpose of arrival of the police. The novelist recalls this childhood memory as she writes:

.....they have come to take your Bapu to prison but it was nothing to worry about because he wanted to go.....we ate chocolate cake and in little girl's mind prison became in some mysterious way associated with chocolate cake. (P. 21)

Mrs. Sahgal also expresses her personal experience of politics. She also recalls an incident in which her mother was arrested at night in the month of August and she writes:

Mummie was arrested a few days later and though we had expected her arrest for weeks.....seven trucks loaded with armed policemen drove up to the house to take her to prison.....it was an incongruous situation. (P. 23)

Sahgal tells how Anand Bhawan was an arena of leading Indian politicians and later how it was given to Congress Party for its office and it was turned into a Swaraj Bhawan, an office to Congress Party.

Sahgal describes her personal experience of freedom struggle of India and her parents' role in the movement. This autobiography is full of Sahgal's memories of childhood in her family and political atmosphere at Anand Bhawan which was an arena of political activities where various politicians frequently visited to discuss the plans and strategies against the British

government and the contemporary government always kept an eye on them. As a result, the leaders were frequently arrested and put to jails. Sahgal describes how his maternal uncle Nehru whom she called Mamu, her father Pandit Sitaram whom she called Bapu and her mother (mummie) and many others freedom fighters were arrested by the police. Sahgal in the chapter 'The War to Us', concludes the full explanation of her mother and describes her personal experience as she writes:

.....Mamu has already gone; Papu is going one a day or two and my turn will come next week. You, Lekha and Tara will remain out, and you will be Satyagrahis just the same as we and you will bit by keeping the flag flying over Anand Bhawan. (P. 86)

Sahgal as a child had seen the struggle of freedom fighters and how they used to come to discuss their strategies and plans to make the nation free from the British Government and she remembers her own life very frankly and honestly. She describes her experience when she was a student and her age was just 17 years. This shocking and saddening incident of the death of her father Ranjit Pandit in January 1944 affected Nayanatara's life adversely. This sad news gave a traumatic shock to the writer and She describes this experience as she says:

Bitterness filled me that he had had to die, till I remembered that bitterness had been his the most second enemy. He had sent us away so that we would grow up free and strong children.....but now it would be to deny all he had lived for and the purpose for which he had died. (P. 208)

The above discussion clearly shows that this autobiography filled with her personal memories and childhood experiences and deals with the story of Indian struggle of which Sahgal as a child was keen observer of all this and she has very minutely discussed the account of events.

Sahgal also describes the incidents of her childhood memories. She shares her childhood experience when she was invited as a key note speaker to the annual function as alumni at Redcliff Institute. She, while addressing the people present there, she shares her childhood memories and personal experience as she says that my parents went to jail repeatedly during our fight for freedom. My father died in jail because he was released too late to be cured of his long

illness. My uncle Nehru became the first Prime Minister of India. I was born and brought up within the atmosphere of hopes and ideals of Congress Party. I became a political journalist and a novelist about contemporary India. A.V. Krishna Rao in 'Nayantara Sahga; A Study of Her Fiction and Non Fiction' writes:

....She was inherited and cherished a certain values and attitude towards life which can be described as a complex social liberalism, economic moderation and interaction with the Gandhian idealism. (P. 4)

At last, because of constant struggle of freedom fighters the nation got freedom in 1947 and after independence the narrative shifts to Delhi from Allahabad. Her mother, after her win in first election in 1952, is made as a cabinet minister and she is allotted a residence at 30, Aurangzeb Road. Sahgal describes the condition of the residence as she thinks that it was a small, tidy, compact and contained as Lutyens had planned it. Thus, Sahgal has described her personal experience of childhood in a very realistic manner at Anand Bhawan which starts with happy note but has an unhappy ending.

Autobiographical or personal experience in the novel *The Day in Shadow* (1969)

The Day in Shadow (1969) is the 4th novel of Nayantara Sahgal. This novel is highly autobiographical one in which the writer has expressed her post married life very realistically through the story of Simrit and her husband Som and her relationship with Raj Garg, a former ICS and in current times an M.P. We see much similarity between the married life of Mrs. Sahgal and Simrit, her husband Som appears to be Gautam Sahgal, and Raj Garg appears to be Mangat Rai, whom after divorce Nayantara married twice. The love story of Simrit and Gautam has a parallel in that of Nayantara and Gautam. Mrs. Sahgal was attracted to her husband Gautam because seemed to belong to the world she had never known. In the novel Sahgal has purposefully introduced female protagonist Simrit who is a free lance journalist but a victim and silent sufferer as Nayantara was in her real life. Actually, through the story of Simrit and Som, Sahgal has described her own personal life as she, in her *This Time of Fulfillment*, acknowledges:

In this book I tried to figure out something realistically what had happened to me, the shattering experience of divorce. (P. 15)

In the novel Sahgal has expressed her personal experience through the story is a story of Simrit of Som and Raj Garg. Simrit is educated and wants to make her career and wants a live a life of self respect and dignity while her husband Som is a business man and always after money. He never respects his wife and exploits her feelings and sentiments. As a result, their marriage is not happy one and they live a cat and dog life. Their thinking is different which causes unhappiness in their life. Som is the typical product of male dominated society who always keeps his wife under his complete control and for him a wife is not an individual but just a property to her husband.

In the novel the central female character Simrit, like a typical loyal Indian wife, tolerates all humiliation without making a question or raising any voice. Actually, the story Nayantara and Som is at once similar to the relationship of Simrit and Som. When the oppression reaches its climax and water goes above head and when it becomes impossible for Simrit to stay with Som then at last decides to take divorce and their unhappy marriage comes to an end in 1967. At this the author expresses her personal experience and she repents on her wrong choice. In her autobiographical book *From Fear Set Free* expresses her regret and repentance in the following as she writes:

I should not have married when I did. I don't think it was cut out to marry young. One should take time in making decision of marriage. (P. 17)

In this autobiographical novel the writer expresses her personal experience of mental agony, disharmony and dissolution of marriage. After divorce Mrs. Sahgal comes to know the cruel face of society and she has to face a lot of problems to cope up with her own fears and woman's identity which doesn't recognize a woman's identity in absence of her husband she thinks:

.....a divorced woman is stigmatized forever and she is curiously watched by others as if divorce were a disease that left pock marks. (P. 4)

Simrit has spent a long time of her married life with her husband and after divorce she has to live alone without company of her husband or a man. Her inner disintegration and inner pain follows her like a shadow and she describes her personal experience as she writes:

She was clinging to a balustrade at the very top of the building within the sky, her fingers were wrenched loose one by one and she was hurled to the pavement below.....the pain detached itself from her and walks beside her to the end of the pavement, the road and beyond. (P. 50-51)

After divorce Simrit shifts to a Defence Colony with her three children. She faces many economic problems and she frequently remembers her husband Som but he never thinks of Simrit's problems. The cruel nature of Som is depicted in the form of consent terms as he doesn't want to see Simrit happy and she has to pay 72% tax on her own earnings apart from deposits like annuity.

Simrit refuses to accept the terms and takes the help of Raj Garg, an M.P. and male protagonist in the novel. Raj, a true friend makes every kind of help, takes her to an Advocate, Ramkrishan who advises her to make a trust and for that she needs the help of her husband Som. Simrit requests Som for help but Som refuses to help her. It was another problem for the writer. When there is no way left then Raj helps her and suggests for marriage. This decision of Raj confuses Simrit but later she accepts this new relation which makes her free from her dark past and gets freedom in the loving shadow of Raj. He stands by Simrit in hard times and as a true friend provides every kind of possible help. He encourages Simrit to fight against injustice, for an independent life of self respect and dignity. He is a well wisher to Simrit and does not even mind when Simrit gets angry and uses hard words against Raj as she says:

...but this is my problem and you behave as if it were yours. (P. 40)

Thus, Sahgal in this novel expresses her own personal experience of post marital life. The novel is a story of Simrit and Som but Raj gives it a final shape. Simrit marries Som with dreams of peace and social security but later finds that she has made a wrong choice. Simrit has three children as Nayantara has in her real life.. It is to be noted that Simrit is not a weak woman but like her creator (Nayantara) takes home as sacrosanct. Actually, while writing this novel Mrs. Sahgal was struggling under the burden of her divorce settlement and she has expressed her personal experience through the story of Simrit, her husband Som, and Raj whom she marries twice. It is Raj who gives her every king of freedom and teaches her a dictum 'Know Thyself'.

Conclusion

Nayantara Sahgal is a writer with a difference. In her autobiographical non-fictional work *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) Nayantara has expressed her childhood and her growing up in her family and particularly with her two sisters Chanderlekha and Gita which is considered to be the most beautiful part of the book. It describes her personal experience of her parents and relatives' frequent arrest and jail going in the midst of the freedom struggle of pre-independent India. The book is also a tale of her education in America and her meeting with Pearl S. Buck and Paul Robinson. This book is a tribute to Ranjit Sitaram who died in jail in 1944. While in the novel *The Day in Shadow* (1969) Mrs. Sahgal has personal experience of her own post married life and its problems caused by divorce. She has very skillfully and brilliantly described her own experience of life and her through various imaginary female and male characters. It is to be noted that in her novel *The Day in Shadow*, Mangat Rai seems to be Raj Garg, the central character Simrit is Mrs. Sahgal, the author of the novel and Som appears to be Gauatam Sahgal in real life. Thus, Sahgal has very skillfully and realistically has expressed her personal experience through the story of Simrit, Som and Raj.

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