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Fictional World of Nayantara Sahgal: A Thematic Study



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Abstract

The mid 20th century saw the upsurge of a new awareness about the women's marginalised position resulting into the birth of women's movement. Literature is the mirrors of society and polity is the frame work of the social consciousness reflected therein and could not remain unaffected by the women's marginalization is society especially patriarchal society. The post independence period has brought to the forefront a number of noted women novelists who have enriched India English fiction by a creative release of feminine sensibility.

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 women character who gradually moves towards an awareness of her emotional needs. Nayantara Sahgal's novels read like commentaries on the political social turmoil that India has been facing since independence. Mrs. Sahgal's feeling for politics and her common over English are rather more impressive than her art as a novelist. All her major characters of the novel are drawn towards the vortex of politics. Besides politics, fiction also focuses attention on Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realisation as a woman novelist, Sahgal recognizes that her

primary obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of woman. She has described 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

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

Research Paper

Introduction :

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.⁷ In 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.”

The novels of Nayantara Sahgal deal with a wide gamut of themes ranging from personal dilemma and problems, joys and sorrows fulfillment and frustrations of female protagonists to the political upheavals that India has experienced since Independence. Her proximity to political power has enabled her to project the kaleidoscopic view of the political changes in the country. She indeed is the ring-side view of the happenings behind the political and bureaucratic curtains.

Rich like us portrays a nation which once embraced the hallowed Gandhian ideals and which in modern times has repudiated with a vengeance, as it were, Gandhi and all that he stood for in his life and politics. M.K.Naik observes that the real test of political novel is in its preservation of the integrity of its fictional values of the ensuring that politics permeates the work either in the form of ideas and ideology or in respect of setting action as genuinely non-political literature.”

Nayantra Sahgal invests reality as a springboard to realize her vision of fulfillment in the life of her characters. Her novel Prove that the theme shapes the form and the form of her novels is bright with the real life becomes inseparable in her fiction. She explores the spirit of freedom through the consciousness of heroine, and its significance in the lives of other less important characters like Kishorilal. *Rich like us* can be described as what, John Barth calls the “literature of replenishment” Sahgal tells the story and looks at life at least in the present novel, from two planes of view. One is the Omniscient author's and the other is Sonali the heroine's. The novel is admired for its creative innovation and optimistic vision of life. Her story is told in the third person by the authorial narrative voice and in the first person in the voice of the heroine. By the artistic alternative of the focus between these two points of view are the two angles of the vision, the novelist projects a social-political reality at two-levels the level of the masses and the level of the individual. This symbolizes two classes into which the character in the novel seems to fall naturally. The technique of twofold vision enables Sahgal

to portray vividly the two Indias—the India of the rich western educated, ruling elite, and Bharat the India of a poor toiling mass of humanity which has been denied the fruits of India’s independence. The two Indias do not complement each other; rather they are in sharp contrast with each other and with unbridgeable gulf between them.

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)

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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. 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 sand, 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.

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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