

“SENSITIVITY TOWARDS POLITICAL AND HUMAN BACKGROUND IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL’S STORM IN CHANDIGARH”

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Abstract

In the galaxy of Indian novelist in English the name of Nayantara Sahgal shines luminously by her significant contribution to the enrichment of the Indian English novels. She is undoubtedly the only woman writer in English in India who is also a political columnist, whose newspaper articles are characterized by their topicality, simplicity and above all boldness. Nayantara Sahgal has been crowned with literary glory by winning Sinclair Award and Sahitya Akademi Award.

She communicates with the society as well as the global readers. She is the literary artist who has succeeded in affirming her position and identity. In Mrs. Sahgal, one can easily discern a happy combination of two sensitivities- the sensitivity of an artist and the sensitivity of a humanist.

The present paper attempts to study Nayantara Sahgal’s novels in the context of sensitivity towards political and human background. The study shows how the novelist shapes and directs the two sensitivities.

Keywords: Human sensitivity; Political sensitivity; Humanism; Morality; Gandhian Ideology.

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Introduction

The second of the three daughters of Mrs. Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Nayantara Sahgal is a writer of very sharp sensibilities, and has brought fiction to the new dimensions which underline a rich heritage co-mingled with strong western impact. Her sensibility may be summed up as the post-Independence, brought to the violent birth in the almost overnight break down of scruple and the rise of naked ambition and crass careerism that marked the dawn of post Independent era. She writes about those areas of life which she has known and of which she has direct personal and first-hand experience. It is the upper strata including the upper middle class landlords, bureaucrats, business executives industrialists, administrators, politicians, university-professors, diplomats and wealthy well-to-do in general, as also their domestic arena, which she explores with the competence and technical know-how of an adept artist. She is interested in both the exterior crust of life as well as in the dim untidy complex of interior living. And in tune with the modern trends she like an angry mini prophet expresses herself fearlessly frankly, and with increasing sense of involvement with human life. A great writer is a man impelled by a deep, irresistible sense of responsibility and he appeals to a deep sense of responsibility in us, and Mrs. Sahgal seems to be in full agreement with one of her creations saying:

“If I could convince one person of my acquaintance before I die that the world consists of human beings and not of men and women in water tight compartments, I’d count it an achievement”¹

The chief characteristic of her fictional art lies in her deep involvement in other people’s pain. Permissive in outlook, she stands for the new humanism and a new morality, according to which woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure but man’s equal and honored partner in word and deed as against the inhuman, traditional postures, old impossible ideas, taboos and prejudices which being obsolete must be cast aside like old, worn out and torn clothes. *“The world is in need of a universal culture, if not in literal terms, at least in terms of thoughts and values”²*

She is for unfettered freedom to choose, including the freedom to choose wrongly. But at the same time she is very careful to add that life must obey some discipline. She was placed in an

environment where the political and the personal were inseparable. She is equally aware of the period and place of her birth and its historical importance.

She inherits from her father's views the idea of equality of women which she has strongly advocated in her novels. She remembers Ranjit Sitaram Pandit as a generous and understanding father who never allowed the inhibiting forces of society to enter his family. Her father was a scholar and had a deep-seated faith in man's innate angelic values, so like a scholar he offered his companionship to his daughters, treating them as equals and explaining to them the complexities of contemporary political values. He kept his daughters away from the cramping influence of the forces of conformism and Hindu orthodoxy. Nayantara Sahgal was very much attached to her father and she felt in herself that in some inexplicable way her happiness and unhappiness were deeply bound up with his. Thus Nayanatara Sahgal inherited from her father her passion for scholarship and a sense of history and politics and a sense of equality of all and it was her father's love for wide open space which kept her away from the narrow sectarian influences.

She has moulded her intellectual and cultural bent of mind because of the impact of Indian ethos of life which came on the fore in the treatment of East-West encounter. All Sahgal's work, like that of Shashi Deshpandey is firmly rooted in Indian though western characters in India frequently play significant roles in her fiction. She is always in favour of woman liberation. Sahgal shows a sense of liveliness to a woman's predicament in a male oriented society. Her plea is to end the subjugation of women by eradicating the existing gender- discrimination and evolve a code of morality based on involvement, communication, love and understanding.

The theme of *Storm in Chandigarh* is violence, not necessarily an obvious physical violence, but an invisible and the more subtle form of violence- the infliction of one person's will on another. A trenchant defender of human value, Nayantara Sahgal, in her novels, pleads for enduring comradeship, frank and friendly communication, a compassionate approach in order untangles the personal and social pattern.

Sensitivity Towards Political Background

*“Nayantara Sahgal’s most remarkable achievement is her perceptive of political scene. She gazes at the politics of the time so minutely that even mere straws in the present air spring into view as tokens of typhoons in store”.*³

Storm in Chandigarh has two themes running alongside each other. The political theme deals with the ‘storm’ or the crisis in the newly divided states of Punjab and Haryana and between their respective Chief Ministers. Chandigarh is the common capital of both these states, but the political situation is tense because of differences between them. Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab, is representative of the ambitious politician, getting results for personal gains, without caring for the ways and means involved. He does not hesitate in using even violence as a mean, if it can bring quick results. His counterpart Harpal Singh, Chief Minister of the neighbouring Haryana, believes in the Gandhian ideology of non- violence and is a milder person. He cannot get quick results like Gyan Singh and therefore is unable to get popularity.

As a novelist, Nayantara Sahgal always uses a political set up as background for her characters. Politics is in her blood and she firmly believes that individuals and politics greatly influence each other. Inder tells Mara, *“you can’t get away from politics in this country”*.⁴ Every individual is affected by political policies and situations.

The novel is invariably motivated by political action, ideas and present political events. Storm in Chandigarh can be treated as a political novel in the sense that its action, characters and setting are grounded in politics.

The sixties and early seventies was the real chaotic period of our national life. The dedicated politicians or the old order were still living, but not very effectively. It was the time when the old leaders were dedicated to Gandhian ideals and democracy. They were not followed by the new leaders. They looked only to their own interests always under the grab of some new ideals. Now dedicated leadership has come to a dead end and the nation has suffered a major change:

“The map of India, once a uniform piece of territory to administer was now a welter of separate, sensitive identities, resurrected after independence. Psychology seemed to play as important a

*part in understanding them as did history, geography and economics. Much more than facts and figures were required in coping with political rivalries that had now ceased even to make bargains”.*⁵

Violence that was so common a feature on the national scene during the sixties, captures the attention of Sahgal and becomes her central concern in the novel:

*“Outburst of brutal, calculated violence had become a feature of cities. There were too many in the congestion and chaos who had nothing to lose by violence, too many other who sat inert and indifferent, their sap sucked dry, watching it mount and ebb like some great tidal wave, waiting for it to engulf them...”*⁶

The uneasy political situation in Chandigarh provides the story structure. In the bifurcated states of the Punjab and Haryana, there still remains the quarrel over boundaries, water, and electric power. It continues by the presence of both the new state governments in the common capital, Chandigarh, which each claims exclusively as its own.

*“Nayantara Sahgal’s sympathies do not lie with the new leaders of our nation who lack a firm ideal and are inclined to exploit the popular sentiments to their ends. It is a credit to her as a political novelist that she could sense and show the danger in the new trend six years before the country had actually experienced the culmination of such a trend.”*⁷

The novel deals with persons employed in solving the Chandigarh problem, the misunderstandings and quarrels among ministers and professionals elections and the role of money in them. She considers her novels to be political in content and she says, *“Each of the novels more or less reflects the political era we were passing through.”*⁸The world of her fiction is largely occupied by political leaders, business tycoons, foreign advisors, upper class people, journalists and highly qualified persons like ambassadors, ministers, vice- chancellors and professors. With these political themes is often combined the theme of human relationship.

Sensitivity Towards Human Background

Sahgal projects the human background along with the political background. Second the novelist launches her theme based on human nature, behavior, isolation of the individual and the need for human understanding. There is lack of communication between individuals, especially between man and wife which causes unhappiness and prevents human fulfillment. These two themes are not simply stated but are also woven into a subtle, pattern of ‘multicoloured tapestry’.

Dr. Shyam M. Asnani, in his work ‘Critical Response to Indian English Fiction’ expresses his views that:

“In Sahgal one can easily discern a happy blend of two sensitivities- the sensitivity of an artist and the sensitivity of a humanist. As a humanist, she realizes that human personality is a precious hard- won achievement, worthy of nurture, irrespective of sex. She regrets that in this atomic age when monumental problems have been resolved by science and research, the human relationship still seems largely unsearched. She, therefore, pleads for the new marital morality based on mutual trust, consideration, generosity, and absence of pretence, selfishness and self-centeredness. Here in this novel Sahgal is deeply concerned with the failure of marital relationship, the loneliness of living and private terrors.”⁹

Vishal’s failure in marriage results in the death of his wife and leaves him a widower. He develops a relationship with Gauri, a Bengali businessman’s wife. At Chandigarh he falls in love with Saroj, the wife of Inder, who is having an affair with Mara, the wife of Jit. In the end Jit and Mara start loving each other. Saroj leaves Inder and goes to Delhi to Vishal Dubey. There is mutual relationship of four persons who, both in love and marriage turn but to be alien to one another. It realistically interweaves the centre-state paradox with the ill- fated marriage of Inder and Saroj. Mara, already married to Jit, is fascinated by Inder. The novelist is more concerned about the lives of three young married couples, Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara and Dubey and Leela. There is no warmth or closeness in human relationship, even in marriage. People live together under the same roof totally unaware of each other, like strangers. The novelist points out that communication and understanding are the foundations of a happy marriage, and help to make life meaningful and worthwhile. The relationship between Saroj and Inder is not

satisfactory because Saroj wants to be recognized as an individual, whereas Inder treats her merely as a wife. Saroj longs for love and understanding, but every time it has to be begged and given as a charity. She withdraws into silence and gets busy with her children and garden work. Saroj finds comfort and solace in the company of Vishal Dubey. Inder, who himself is not true to Saroj objects to her friendship with Vishal. She finds her life with Inder almost suffocating. She feels it impossible to go on without Vishal's friendship. Saroj's unhappiness springs when she fails to make up the right kind of relationship with Inder. All her attempts to build up a relationship, based on love, companionship and equality with Inder, fail. Now communication is impossible between them. She wants to throw her life away to Inder and walks out into a new one. Her pre-marital love affair with a boy is a matter of tension for her husband.

Sahgal portrays his character more out of pity rather than anger. Inder is made to believe "*who would have flung her out with the rubbish considered her used, soiled and unfit for marriage*"¹⁰. He thinks himself to have been cheated. Saroj, who pays the penalty, suffers the secret disgrace, sickened into silence and turned to stone. Saroj's remark "*I'm alone even when Inder is here*"¹¹ conveys her deep anguish and distress. It is Vishal in the end, who helps her realize that whatever has happened in the past she is an "honourable woman" and that Inder must stop his old brutal game of suspicion and torture. Jit and Inder are designed to be foil to each other. Both are the young industrialists, both have had the traumatic experience of the partition in their youth. Jit is more liberal and practical and has a larger perspective on life and things.

The novelist highlights the growing sense of individuality of the wife, her anger for traditional image around her and the suffering caused, while she tries to break away from them. "*Storm depicts violence making inroads not merely into the body politic but also into the personal lives of the people. Inder, with his "ancient tribal, male roots"*"¹²

"Feeling 'squeamish' about the expression and comprehension of human emotions, is made the prototype of the rabble-rousing, demagogue, Gyan Singh, on the personal level. Vishal, the central observer of the scene of political violence and the individual observer of violence in human relationship, sympathizes with victims of both equating explicitly Harpal Singh, the Haryana C.M. with Saroj-both Victims of violence in the public and the personal realms

respectively."¹³ Mrs. Sahgal deals at the same time, with complex human relationships in both private and public life. She greatly values love, friendship, honesty, freedom and equality and tells us that these must never be sacrificed at any cost.

In many ways the political crises is symbolic of this deeper crisis in the lives of human beings as a whole. There is no warmth or closeness in human relationships, even in marriage. People live together under the same roof, totally unaware of each other, like strangers. Nayantara points out this phenomenon as a serious matter and lays great emphasis on the glory of communication and understanding.

Conclusion

Nayantara Sahgal's artistic exploitation of the cult of violence in politics and human relations comes off successfully in the novels. Sahgal professes not only human background or values but also political background and values. The study portrays and interprets contemporary political realities. She analyses and interprets various political events with an intelligent and perceptive mind and reads the individual responses of the characters.

The novelist shapes and directs the sensitivity of political and human background. The main male and female characters are portrayed alike. The heroes are either diplomats or businessmen, intelligent and keenly concerned with the progress of the country.

Nayantara Sahgal has given us a fuller and deeper understanding of her characters through human background and relationship. She has shown how transformation is possible through love and trustfulness. As a creative writer she has made a conscious effort to highlight these themes and their importance in everyday life.

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