

Nayantara Sahgal's Art: Juxtaposing the Past with the Present

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to portray Nayantara Sahgal's art of using the technique of juxtaposing the past with the present in an alternation of scenes. Analysing the themes and ideas discussed in the Indo-Anglian novels this paper beautifully analyses the thematic structure of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. Thus, this paper picturizes how Nayantara Sahgal hated inaction and how she encouraged people to act against injustices and wrong doings.

Keywords: Nayantara Sahgal, juxtaposing past with present, Politics, National consciousness, violence, Freedom struggle, independence.

Indo-Anglian literature is no longer a literature of the outhouse; it is now a mature and respectable genre of what is known as common wealth literature with its inevitable stamp of Indianness. During the last five decades, it has no doubt, attracted a great deal of critical attention both from Indian and foreign critics. Novelists like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy have made significant contribution to Indo-Anglican fiction, out of which Nayantara Sahgal occupies a prominent place in the realm of Indian – English fiction.

Indo-Anglian Literature is by now an established genre with a history of a hundred and fifty years. It is the Indian writing in English or the creative literature produced in the English language by Indians. The appearance of Indo-Anglian literature was motivated by factors political, economic and cultural. But political and economic considerations apart, the English language itself seems to have captivated the educated Indian. The creative impulse of India found a medium of expression which in itself was literary, flexible and aesthetic enough to exercise its circle-charm. This is also the view held by P.C. Kotoky in his book *Indo-English Poetry* thus:

“It needs no special mention that a big section of the Intelligentsia was fascinated by the power, flexibility and beauty of the English language. For them to be able to speak and write in English was primarily a pleasure and an achievement. The fashion

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for writing English began to grow fast
At first imitative, it soon became
assimilative and adoptive” (P 32).

The pioneers of Indo-Anglian literature were men of western education who assumed the role of interpreting the ethos of Indian culture to the West through imaginative literature. Poetry was first to come and it was associated with the cultural Renaissance in Bengal where the assault of English on the citadel of Indian culture first took place. It was from here that the literary awakening dawned. Indo-Anglian literature underwent the period of gestation and pangs of birth to reach the period of fruition and fulfillment. To quote Meenakshi Mukherjee, “Most of the early Indo-Anglian experiments in literature were done in verse. Prose of a non-fictional variety existed in abundance, but it was motivated mostly by extra-literary impulses like political protest and social reform. The novel, the genre of imaginative literature which give artistic form to the relationship of man and society, was conspicuously absent until the nineteen twenties” (PP 17-18). K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar adds:

“what makes Indo-Anglian literature an
Indian literature and not just a ramshackle
outhouse of English literature is the quality
of its Indianness – in the choice of
subject, in the texture of thought and
play of sentiment, in the organisation
of material and in the creative use of language” (P 63).

Even if drama came to prominence, Indo-Anglo literature won its recognition through the novel writing of writers like Raja Rao, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Khushwant Singh, R.K. Narayan, Manohar Malgaonkar, Anita Desai and a host of others. The Indo-Anglian novel, since its birth is said to have passed through the main phases. The first one is the phase of the historical novel. This phase was short-lived. The second was the long-lived phase of the socially and politically conscious novel. It was the phase of social realism. The third is the phase of the psychological novel with a concern for the private. R.C. Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore were supposed to be the pioneers giving an initiative to India English fiction, out of whom Tagore was regarded as an Indian novelist of considerable merit who “brought psychological delineation to the novel and he added depth and significance to the novel – a great leap forward in the development of the novel” (Mehta 60). 1920 is the year of the real beginning of the Indian Anglian novel, for the novelists were serious about their art going from a flirtation with history and romance towards contemporary problems of politics and society. K.S. Venkataraman’s *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan, the Patriot*, D.F. Karaka’s *There Lay the City* (1942) and *We Never Die* (1944), Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), M.R. Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), R.K. Narayan’s *The Dark Room* (1960), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1951), E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Ahmad Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi*, Aamir Ali’s *Conflict* (1947), K.A. Abbas’ *Tomorrow is Ours* (1943), Sudhin V. Ghosh’s *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951), *Flame of the Forest* (1955) and the works of other prominent novelists like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgaonkar, B.Rajan, Arun Joshi,

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Chaman Nahal and a few others laid focus on social realism in the novel writing. Following the male counterparts, the emergence of women novelists in Indo-Anglian literature took place as early as the last quarter of 19th century but it was only after Independence that they could make solid contribution to Indo-Anglian fiction.

Kamala Markandaya, whose portrayal of India has parallels with the thematic interests of Bhabani Bhattacharya is one of the most gifted and most widely known Indian women novelists in English and another woman novelist of international fame and distinct is Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Nayantara Sahgal, who followed suit, is one of the most significant women novelists of the present generation. Her novels include *A Time to be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1964), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) deal with present-day politics after independence in and outside Delhi. Her novels are nothing but subtle comments on contemporary scene in India. Shyam S. Asnani in his article “The Novels of Nayantara Sahgal” sees Nayantara Sahgal as a political columnist, whose newspaper articles (mostly in Sunday Standard) are characterised by their topicality, simplicity and above all boldness. Her writing is often courageous in the best tradition of liberal journalism (P 36). A common view is that there is always a connection between a writer’s life and his or her literary work: in the case of Nayantara Sahgal, this connection happens to be far more intimate. Nayantara Sahgal is the second daughter of Vijayalakshmi Pandit. Her mother and her maternal uncle Jawaharlal Nehru were actively engaged in the freedom struggle. Nayantara Sahgal brought up in this environment, had an easy grip of politics. Spent most of her childhood in Anand Bhavan the ancestral home of the Nehrus in Allahabad. One could declare that “politics is in her blood” (Shyamala 268).

Nayantara’s Sahgal’s first novel *A Time to be Happy* presents the dawn of Indian independence *A Situation in New Delhi* presents the Indian capital with the ‘After-Nehru-who’ question, *Rich Like Us* is about the emerging. *The Storm in Chandigarh* and *The Day in Shadow* are emotional autobiographies. Nayantara herself acknowledges that “they are pieces of her going into the men and women” (Jain 16). *Storm in Chandigarh* deals with the particular of Punjab. However, *Storm in Chandigarh* cannot be strictly called a political novel as the political situations are used only as vehicles to portray human emotions.

Storm in Chandigarh uses politics as a scaffold. This shows the author’s predilection for politics. As the novel unfolds, politics becomes secondary. As T.K. Thomas puts it, “*Storm in Chandigarh* appears to be primarily a story of “broken homes and changed relation and not a political novel in the sense *This Time of Morning*” (P 140). Dr. Sarma differs with Thomas’ view and asserts that *This Time of Morning* and *Storm in Chandigarh* may be called political in at least one sense because of “their environment and political administrative milieu of Delhi” (Agarwal 491). Sahgal does not confine herself with politics but portrays how frustrations effect the ordinary routine of life. The author presents it through crucial and critical circumstances and allows the characters to pass through them. The political situation of a country or a state would certainly affect individuals in general and politicians in particular. One cannot easily escape the trap of political commotion. The author concurs with this idea through Inder, a major character who tells Mara, “you can’t just get away from politics in this country” (SIC 169).

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The characters in *Storm in Chandigarh* belong to the upper class of the Indian Society, like the politicians, civil servants, business magnets and their wives who are used to a high standard of living. Chandigarh is a town well-known to the author and hence it becomes the scene of action. The political situation erects the story structure. After the formation of Andhra Pradesh on linguistic basis in 1953, the demand for the formation of other states on the similar basis arose throughout the country, to which Punjab is no exception. The Government of India gave its verdict on June 9, 1966. According to this decision, Chandigarh was made the union territory and joint capital of both the Punjab and Haryana. The Punjabis demanded Chandigarh, originally raised as a Capital for Punjab, and also the Bhakra dam. Chandigarh because of its crucial position naturally becomes the playfield of the politicians.

Politicians handle different tactics to advertise themselves and their party by launching mass campaigns, rallies, satyagrahas and hartals. Nayantara is very adept in the manoeuvre of the politicians who are very clever in justifying and claiming their stand on the ground of common welfare. Gyan Singh, one of the characters of *Storm in Chandigarh* portrayed as the Chief Minister of the newly formed Punjab, is no exception. Gyan Singh wants the Bhakra Project now under the control of the centre to be controlled by his State. Demanding this, Gyan Singh launches a ‘crippling strike-threat’ in Chandigarh to demonstrate his strength. Since Chandigarh remains the common capital of Punjab and Haryana, both claim ownership of Chandigarh. Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of the newly formed Haryana feels that there is “something sinister at the ‘root of the partition mentality’” (SIC 30). The clash between the two Chief Ministers is not only between the individuals but also between their ideologies – Gyan Singh standing for violence and Harpal Singh for non-violence. Thus, tension is created right from the start, and it prevails on the emotional side too. Gandhian values are said to have formed the basis of Nayantara’s approach to problems, both political and personal. Her attraction towards them has been “their reliance on tradition, consideration for the individual and dependence of moral values” (Asnani 50). Unless these values are integrated, society can never become total in its existence, nor can the individual enjoy the freedom he desires. Hence, in the course of her narration, society becomes predominant and politics gets subverted.

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, society is portrayed through the inter-relationship of the three families: Jit-Mara, Inder-Saroj and Dubey-Leela. The society they depict is the society of partitioned Punjab and the partition does not leave at rest the individual’s mind and growth too. The novel shows the author’s concern with an India which has retreated from Gandhian values. The retreat has penetrated into the emotional setting she creates. On the one hand, the confrontation is between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh on political issues and on the other, between man and woman she has created on the emotional issues. Every individual in the novel seems to be affected by the political situations. “Sahgal seems to build up the novel where milieu is matter and is discussed as characters move from cocktail parties to club dances” (Gupta 27).

Taking up the structure of *Storm in Chandigarh* for close study, what strikes one is “the manner in which some aspects of the theme and characterization fall into a certain patterning, symmetrical sets of similarities or contrasts around the pivotal character Vishal Dubey” (Kothandaraman 27). Vishal Dubey becomes central to the development of action. One can see him dangling between the political and the emotional side. The ‘storm’ in the novel works on two planes: i) political crisis because of the bifurcation of Punjab and Haryana with Chandigarh as the common Capital ii) the emotional crisis in the marital relations in the lives of three young couples. Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara and Dubey and Leela. At the commencement of the novel, Vishal Dubey is a widower left only with the scarce memories of his unsuccessful married life with Leela. “Very often suffering is the badge of honest people whose disinterested action combined with an attitude of non-attachment may deprive them of intimacy and personal love” (Rao 46). Dubey’s marriage to Leela causes him a great deal of untold misery especially when Leela proves herself to be an audacious adulteress. The wedlock turns out to be a vanishing search for communication. Vishal suffers a permanent void within himself and it finds satisfaction now and then by forming new relationships. Against the political background, Vishal Dubey gets involved in the lives of men and women of varied temperaments. Dubey meets Inder and Saroj in Chandigarh. He starts visiting their house after Leela’s death. Dubey is the sharp focal point of the structuring. “His relationship with his dead wife Leela, his love-cum-friend Gauri and with Saroj fall into a pattern of emotional fulfillment through stages” (31). The two young couples with whom Dubey comes into contact in Chandigarh. Saroj-Inder and Mara-Jit are a study in contrast. Thus, the emotional plane gets itself established. The temperamental incompatibility of Saroj and Inder finally leads to a complete breakdown of communication between them, despite their two children. “Inder’s unrefined consciousness sharply contrasts with the highly developed sensibility of Saroj” (Jain 51).

A.V. Krishna understands that in the novel The denouement has Dual significance. First, Gyan Singh calls off the general strike following a day of sporadic violence involving Harpal Singh who gets shot in the midst of the crowds of the over-wrought workers. When “Harpal gets shot and wounded, it is a symbolic act of self-purification in the Gandhian tradition” (Rao 18). This in itself would not be adequate to round off the political action. So Nayantara uses ‘death’ as the solution for political crisis. The ‘Storm’ blows off when Gyan Singh calls off the strike in Chandigarh. It is a gesture of peace from a violent tempered man, which cannot last long.

To conclude, Nayantara Sahgal hates inaction and she wants the people to act against injustice and wrong doings. She says, “one of the ills at the heart of the society is that we cannot pinpoint the responsibility for inaction, for insensitivity for non-performance” (Gupta 104). According to her, all man-made obstructions should be pulled down to promote love and good-will grounded on the glory of communication. Every individual must be taught to climb the social ladder independently so that he or she will not be carried away or lured by others.

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