

Feminine Sensibility and Socio-Political Concerns in Nayantara Sahgal's novels: *Storm in Chandigarh* and *A Situation in New Delhi*

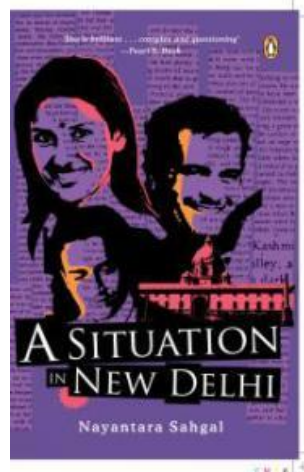
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Nayantara Sahgal

Nayantara Sahgal is a prolific writer. She has to her credit nine novels, two biographies, two political commentaries and a large number of articles, and contributions to various newspapers and magazines.



Sahgal's 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

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were spent amidst India's political reverberations, the struggle for independence from the British yoke and the influence of Gandhian ideas of freedom and non-violence.

A Writer with National Consciousness

Nayantara Sahgal is a writer with national consciousness. She along with her other counterparts like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Santha Rama Rau has emerged as one of the most significant voices in the realm of Indian English fiction. Nayantara Sahgal's first non-fictional work *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 life. The political consciousness which dominates her literary creations is real and inseparable from herself and her surroundings. Born in a family of freedom fighters, which had politics in its very blood, Nayantara Sahgal is, indeed, qualified to write political novels.

Realistic Base

Nayantara Sahgal has been active on the literary scene both as a creative writer and a political columnist. She has the unique distinction of being the political novelist on the Indian English literary scene. Her work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of a society exposed for both freedom and power. She has the honour of being the first Indian woman novelist writing in English dealing with political themes.

General Themes in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal

All the novels of Sahgal truthfully mirror the contemporary Indian political theme and portray the various social and cultural changes that take place in India. In all her novels, she exposes the power-hungry politicians and their madness for power. She highlights the ardent freedom fighters, thirst for freedom and their sacrifices for their motherland. In all her works, there is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. Husband-wife alienation resulting from lack of communication, East-West encounter, extra-marital relationship, existentialistic problems and temperamental incompatibility form the major themes in Sahgal's novels.

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Feminist Fiction

Besides politics, Sahgal's fiction focuses attention on Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. Almost in all her novels, Sahgal has gone deep into the female psyche. Feminism demands an activity, not passivity which analyses our sense of the female presence in the world. A feminist fiction is a work where language and imagery are employed to impart a new vision of reality – reality perceived from a woman's authentic mode of seeing, feeling and measuring her existence without subscribing to the male cultural codes. Feminism seems to involve at two groups of claims, one normative and the other descriptive. Normative – Men and Women are entitled to equal rights and respect. Descriptive – Women are currently disadvantaged with respect to rights and respect compared with men.

Focus on Broken Marriages

In her novels, Sahgal's characters suffer from the torment of broken marriages. Loneliness, suffering and frustration in marriage sometimes cause disintegration and make women rebellious. Most of her couples seem to be happy and contented but they often experience loneliness and feel silences in marriage. For instance, Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* appears as a silent character. Her women characters behave as a normal human being do – succumbing to their ego, committing errors, taking wrong decisions, exposing their weakness but rising them in triumph. They reveal multi-faceted images and occupy varied status in the society. For instance, they live in the capacity of professionals, politicians, friends, parents, spouses and lovers.

Female Protagonists Wriggling Out of Virtuous Stereotypes

The female protagonists in the novels *Storm in Chandigarh* and *A Situation in New Delhi* experience conflict, frustration, alienation and bitterness in their holy marriage.

The female characters in *Storm in Chandigarh* wriggle out of the strait-jacket of virtuous stereotypes and emerge as individuals. This is brought out clearly in the portrayal of far from ideal marriages of three young couples-Vishal and Leela, Inder and Saroj and Jit and Mara. The

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novel is a study of certain similarities and contrasts of virtuous characters. It portrays the young hearts broken up by compulsions of matrimony and call of newfound love.

The Theme

The theme of the novel is violence, not necessarily an obvious physical violence, but an invisible and the more subtle form of violence. Saroj's pre-marital relationship becomes the cause of failure of their marriage. Inder is the husband of Saroj who obsessed and could not forgive this act of Saroj and constantly exploits her sense of innocence. Saroj has become a victim of the male tyranny. Saroj's quest for communication and sharing naturally leads her towards Vishal, whom she finds more understanding and considerate. Vishal who is the husband of Leela wants to build a true relationship with her. But he felt a great deal of unhappiness because she had always lived a life of pretence and hypocrisy with Vishal. She realized the torture of living together intimately yet remained strangers to each other.

Jit and Mara

In the novel, another couple is Jit and Mara who also suffer from a similar dilemma. They are a childless couple who suffer from emotional void in their life. Her marriage with sweet-tempered and considerate Jit has its share of estrangements and misgivings, but Mara's problem is not physical but psychological. The search for communication makes Mara come towards Inder. In her relationship with Inder, Mara stimulates his mind and involves him in ways no woman ever has. Mara is capable of responding to Inder's needs which highlights her inability to respond to Jit's much simpler needs. Mara's lack of interest makes Jit feel that all his affection and care are wasted.

Loneliness of Living Caused by Unhappy Marriages

Sahgal is deeply concerned with unhappy marriages and the loneliness of living. The novel portrays similarities and contrasts of various characters. Women characters in this novel do not like to remain confined within the four walls of their house. Through the portrayal of Leela, Gauri, Saroj and Mara, the author holds a mirror to the society that subjects its women to worst type of inhuman exploitation.

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A Situation in New Delhi

Sahgal's leanings towards feminism are revealed in her next novel *A Situation in New Delhi*. The fact comes to light when one studies the unjustifiable ill-treatment a large number of her women characters in this novel have to undergo in the society and tries to know why they are driven to committing suicide or to seeking divorce, or to undergoing nuisances when it becomes inevitable.

Devi is the younger sister Shivraj. Devi's marriage with Ishwar had been a passing interlude of happiness. However, this was a short-lived episode in her life and Ishwar dies, leaving behind his wife and a son named Rishad. After Ishwar's death, She feels no desire to remarry. The character of Devi perhaps stands as the weakest heroine portrayed by Sahgal. There is no convincing emotional catharsis to rise to the heights of pure tragedy in Devi. A performing puppet, she remains without individuality or sensibility, a caricature of a career politician of the modern era and it is a sad end indeed for Shivraj's sister.

Suicide – Failure of Society to Protect Women

The other woman character who is driven to commit suicide is Madhu in *A Situation in New Delhi*. The society that Nayantara creates in *A Situation in New Delhi* is one which fails to protect women even on the University campus in the capital city of the country as here Madhu, a student of Delhi University, is raped in the Register's office. The boys who raped Madhu obviously regard Madhu only as an object of lust to be used at their disposal and have no regard for her feelings, will and self-respect. A society which produces such men and cannot punish them does not deserve to have women in it.

Seeking Divorce

Lydia and Nell, two ladies who become Michael's wives successively in *A Situation in New Delhi* have to seek divorce because they find their husband's behaviour to be intolerable. Another woman character in the novel that has to undergo torments because she finds her husband incorrigible is Nadira, the wife of Usman Ali. Nadira feels herself to have been wronged by her husband, as she has come to know that he is in love with Devi.

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Narrow-minded Males

In the novel *A Situation in New Delhi*, Sahgal has portrayed her male characters mostly as narrow-minded, ruthless, careless husbands and their life is emptiness and boredom. However, some of her male characters equally suffer in a wrong marriage, due to loneliness or lack of communication.

Socio-Political Concerns in Nayantara Sahgal's novels: *Storm in Chandigarh* and *A Situation in New Delhi*

Sahgal has first-hand knowledge of politics and political figures in India. Her novels *Storm in Chandigarh* and *A Situation in New Delhi* are political novels. Sahgal's novel *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) 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.

Sahgal's novel, *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) depicts the aftermath of a great popular Prime Minister Shivraj, who dominated the political and national scene for a full decade. He was the one who sacrificed his and his aristocratic family's comforts for the freedom of India. The novel is very much based on fact. It is a novel of political dislocation on the level of the novelist's own life. The novel *A Situation in New Delhi* points out the Naxalite movement and student unrest, and above all, the aftermath of Nehru's death. The novel deals with the problems of alienation and frustration of the younger generation of Indians in the context of opportunistic politics pursued in New Delhi. The novel begins with the news of the death of Prime Minister Shivraj, the idealistic and charismatic leader of India. In the novel, there is no gap between the private world and the political world; both the worlds are reciprocally treated in which actions and characters are co-mingled. The novel is indeed representative of the situation in the whole of India.

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Narrative Techniques

In her novels, Sahgal concentrates on the value of violence in the context of political events and ordinary human relations. She gives much importance to the framework of the structure of the novels. In her chapters, she takes up in turn each individual section of her design, filling it out, relating it to the others, continually interweaving past and present until the pattern is complete. In the novel *Storm in Chandigarh*, she speaks of the emotional storms raging in the characters. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, Sahgal uses the stream of consciousness technique.

Conclusion

Thus in all her novels, Sahgal's writing mainly focuses on the women's sexual freedom and self-realization and on the latest political ups and downs with the reflection of Indian contemporary society.

Colophon:

My thanks are due to my Guide and Supervisor
Dr. (Mrs.) M. Ruby Dhavamani, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., Associate Professor of English, The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi 626 123 for her helpful suggestions and guidance in writing this paper.

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