

Nayantara Sahgal's Concern for Freedom and its Related Values : A Study

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Abstract. Nayantara Sahgal, the second daughter of Vijaya Laxmi Pandit and the child of a rich heritage was highly influenced by the freedom struggle politics and learnt to accept many unusual happenings as matters of normal occurrence. Her all novels not only constitute an impressive segment of the Indian English novels but also sum up the saga of India's struggle for freedom and its changes it has brought about in the traditional social set-up in India. Although Sahgal is unique in her artistic sensibility as well as in her particular manner of projecting national and historical consciousness. She also reflects the consciousness of change and the strange and sudden ways in which it has come to shape the character of individuals and the temper of the collective life as well as the competing structures of human values and human destiny. The major legacy of cultural change in modern India has been the new political sense containing in itself a feeling for the past as well as an awareness of the future as both dramatise in the personality of the present. The climate of ideas that one encounters in her novel exemplifies cross-cultural imagination. Her work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of a society for the first time to both freedom and power. She stresses the need for morality in political life and in natural or real freedom. She has opinion that so-called progressive policies cannot be imposed on people without destroying something of values in them. This is also not justifiable from the moral point of view. Changes should be based on the mass urge and need. Democratic methods are the best ways of providing the requisite amount of validity for social change. She writes :

The human being is the only material we possess
in abundance and for whose moulding in character,
behaviour and ideals we ourselves are totally
responsible and not dependent upon others. (*The
National Circus*, 7)

Keywords : Emancipation; ethical basis; communist ideology; self-guarding freedom; feminist approach.

Nayantara Sahgal, the great feminist, novelist and columnist has enormous concern in almost all her novels for freedom and its related values undoubtedly. Her concern is also for the responsibility of the middle class intellectuals towards society. She is aware of the immense task of preserving and continuing the democratic processes in an under developed country where food is more important than freedom. It is in this context that she chooses to emphasize the role of the leader and the intellectuals. Democracy in India is far more a matter of faith than of convenience and it is the

end of going to weigh the balance one way or the other, to make freedom meaningful as a way of life.

The novelist feels that the main threat to freedom lies in a fragmented and one sided approach to it when the leaders and the masses alike feel that it can be realized only in one aspect at a time as an economic or a personal freedom. In her fiction and non-fiction the novelist deals with numerous threats to freedom- violence and narrow regional loyalties in *Storm in Chandigarh*, unscrupulous leadership in *This Time of Morning* and *The Day in Shadow* and political inertia in *Situation in New Delhi*. These threats find a parallel expression in her journalistic career. Violence, she understands, arises out of selfish, narrow attitudes. It is perhaps natural for people to turn violent when idealism and integrity have yielded to unscrupulous ambition in national life.

Nayantara Sahgal is critical of agitations, bandhs, and satyagrahas when people are submitted to mob psychology. Such acts of people are a distortion of the Gandhian methods of Satyagrahas for they lack both the purity and the spirit of sacrifices which marked Gandhian resistance. This shows that the belief in non-violence was confined to the few, but now the time is to look for a new ideal and a new way of life with which people can identify themselves. This search for a new faith should be related to the reality of our own situation and not borrowed from others.

The novelist feels that the communist ideology and methods have no place in India where the quality of life has always had an ethical basis. Gandhi was able to evoke popular response because he had identified himself with the common man and he had made no attempt either to discard tradition or outlaw religion. India's progress and victories in the past have always emanated from its liberal values. This concern for freedom is foremost in the novelist's mind and she is perturbed by the values adopted by the past Lal Bahadur Shastri leadership in the country. She is unhappy with the people in power. She finds Delhi as a small-hearted place concentrating not on ideals but merely on ambitions. These feelings are expressed by Saleem in *This Time of Morning* and Vishal in *Storm in Chandigarh*. The death of Dr. Zakir Hussain and Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru denotes the death like Home Minister in *Storm in Chandigarh*. It is the end of an era and decline of decency in public-life. The novelist points out that the split of the Congress in 1969 was not the result of any revolution or change of ideas. It was simply a strengthening of power in the hands of those who held it and a reversal of all that the freedom struggle and its leaders had achieved. In an article, Nayantara commented on these happenings:

The psychology of power becomes relevant today because we are a democracy in need of revolution, both social and economic. It becomes of terrible and crucial importance what kind of human

material leads this revolution and in what manner.

(*The Sunday Standard*, Sept.17, 19)

The government's policies and propaganda were aimed at creating a dichotomy between democratic ideals and social justice. The novelist stressed the point that they were incompatible. It was no longer possible to take civil liberties for granted and there was no need for concerted efforts in order to prevent further erosion of freedom. Nayantara is critical of the government's policies which were motivated more by the need to make an ideology acceptable rather than by the actual needs of the people.

In one of her articles published in "South Asian Review" the novelist discusses Indira Gandhi's style of working. Sahgal in this article related Mrs. Gandhi's childhood experience to her political behaviour and outlines the development of her policies in an anti-liberal direction. She writes that having been elected to power on the credentials of Pt. Nehru she exploited his image to its maximum capacity. She started building another image for herself. This, Mrs. Gandhi achieved mainly by distinguishing between:

...the party as represented by its losses, and the people whom she identified with herself... (South Asian Review, 189)

Mrs. Gandhi made no secret of her desire to function independently and she rejected the practice of collective decision making. In all this her political behaviour had a break with the past in inspiration, methods and style of leadership. She ruled through political manoeuvres and surprises. Whatever benefit may have resulted from her policies was lost partly because there were not enough follow-up measures and partly because authoritarianism destroyed both initiative and responsibility. Mrs. Indira Gandhi's rise to power made clear the importance of moral integrity in public by demonstrating what could happen in its absence. Nayantara had her analytical study by this observation:

...India's democracy is a part of sheer act of faith. Poverty, illiteracy and under-development present a daily warning to the working of democracy and it has needed a heroic leadership to give content and continuing nurture to it... In Mrs. Gandhi's hands this nurturing has ceased and with it has vanished a powerful intangible for confidence and growth. From the people becoming more politically aware and economically responsible through the exercise of freedom, a great tide has been dramatically reversed. (195)

Nayantara Sahgal, in her two articles published in *The Indian Express*, has traced Mrs. Indira Gandhi's move towards an authoritarian order partly to the fact that her path to power began at the top. She missed the crux and essence of leadership in India by adopting dictatorial methods in a country which has produced great leaders. In her article captioned 'Mrs. Gandhi's Political Style' the novelist writes :

She has emerged as the only manufactured leader consistently built up through media and other channels and relentlessly imposed on the Indian mind through a campaign of emotional appeal and outcry resorting to her father's name. (*The Indian Express*, June 6, 1977)

In her second article in *The Indian Express* the novelist traces Mrs. Gandhi's alienation from her own party colleagues and distrust of her followers. Both in 1969 and 1973 Indira Gandhi violated both party and democratic traditions and ignored them. It was the high time that the educated middle class should have acted to provide an alternative. But it could not be done. They succumbed to the political pressure for lack of courage and leadership. The novelist writes :

It was shocking the way the entire people remained inert, apathetic and non-reacting while the safeguards of freedom were steadily hacked up reversing all achievements to date. (*The Indian Express*, June 7, 1977)

The intellectuals have greater responsibility in a democratic society especially where a large section of it are an educated and unaware of the day to day political happenings in the country. During the post-Shastri years there has been deterioration in the standards of public behaviour and a move towards a closed society. While the leaders betrayed the trust placed in them, the intellectuals failed to take an independent stand. They have shown a lack of courage and have failed both in providing an alternative leadership in safe-hand guarding freedom. Their failure in part is due to their alienation from the masses. The novelist observes that this was not the case during the freedom struggle when the educated were united with the masses under a common inspiration to work for a common welfare and goal. But this sense of identification had been destroyed because the people in power pursued the communist technique of instigating class-war and dividing the people. But all this doesn't excuse the failure of the educated to uphold the cause of freedom. In an article entitled *Injustice and the Intellectual* the novelist writes:

To see that justice is done is not an optional task the intellectual sets himself from time to time, if at all he does. It should be the essence of his functioning. (*The Indian Express*, Oct. 29, 1977)

During the emergency the word 'intellectuals' was reduced to a total force and it appeared that the educated Indian was incapable of understanding justice for it didn't personally affect him. One may analyse the things in right perspective and try to find reasons for total surrender, but all this does not do away with the reality of the situation that in our country people have yet to learn to be brave and courageous.

The freedom movement though it produced great leaders and the right values did not create the right kind of spirit for it failed to produce a second line of leaders equally great and dedicated. The novelist feels that the decline of the intelligentsia began with the Gandhi era, a period when judgment was totally surrendered to the leader. In all these articles Nayantara Sahgal is out-spoken and factual. She is concerned with a wide range of issues and she believes that no human problems will be solved unless the people regard each other as equals.

The novelist emphasizes the need for sex-education and self-respect for a change in the social customs and attitudes. Women are also individual and marriage is a partnership, not an institution. But the whole social set up is geared towards the domination of men over women—in marriage, in sexual relationship, in childbirth and even in adultery it is the woman who is victim. This is fully illustrated in Sahgal's novels. The day women are accepted as equal partners, a new age would begin. Their emancipation is based on the ordinary assumption that a woman's body is after all her own and she has her own thinking on the issues related to her. If the participation of women in social and national life is to be of any value, it has to be on the basis of their own individuality and not as labeled possession.

Nayantara Sahgal opines that the so-called progressive policies cannot be imposed on people without destroying something of value in them. This is also not justifiable from the moral point of view. Changes should be based on the mass urge and need. Democratic methods are the best ways of providing the requisite amount of validity for social change. She writes :

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in abundance and for whose moulding in character,
behaviour and ideals we ourselves are totally
responsible and not dependent upon others.
(Nayantara Sahgal : *The National Circus*. April 10,
1966)

However, it is necessary to face the reality. At times the people in power may not be selfless. The novelist though marginally aware, places her faith in the quality of the leaders. Indian conditions and political reality make it necessary for the leaders to be the men of morality. There can be no remedy for this malady. Integrity is the part of true leadership, bereft of integrity and morality. Leadership deteriorates into self-interest and opportunism. Leadership can best be nurtured in

a free atmosphere. The novelist points out that political leadership is not the only kind of leadership and political dissent is not the only kind of dissent. There are men in other areas who can contribute to the quality of life and they share their own part of responsibility. In this category of people are educated classes, the writers, artists, scientists and industrialists. Their primary duty is not to abandon their own judgment. Sahgal's own intentions are never misled. This can be seen in the political themes of her novels. Her faith in the people's instinct for freedom has been justified in large measure by the 1977 elections when popular vote succeeded in over throwing a dictatorship :

Thus demonstrating a truth older than India's political values, but one that Mahatma Gandhi and his heirs recognized and served: that the individual is the unit of all progress and compassion the most powerful of history's motive forces. (*The Indian Express*, June, 1997)

The political theme is presented mainly through the consciousness of Sonali Ranade, a middle-aged single woman, who is an I.A.S officer in the ministry of Industries. During the Emergency of 1975, she refers to sanction a preposterous foreign collaboration project which has the support of the powers that be. As a result of this she is punished with demotion. She falls ill. After her recovery she watches helplessly with other like-minded, people, the spectacle of how absolute power corrupts absolutely at all levels—various facets of life in the period are shown: all norms are flouted, individual rights curtailed in the name of political stability. It is done with the willing assistance of a generally spineless bureaucracy interested only in self-seeking. Social uplift is sought to be brought about through hasty, ill-considered and repressive measures. The innocent are jailed for having committed non-existent crimes. The young and ambitious opportunists prosper through officially supported shady deals :

The trouble makers are in jail. An opposition is something we never needed. The way the country's wing own now, with one person giving orders and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the cabinet or in parliament, means things can go full steam ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons forever. Strikes are banned. It is going to be very good for business. (*Rich Like Us*, 8)

Neumen, a foreign dignitary, had seen huge posters of the prime minister's stern unsmiling face, and hoardings proclaiming the nation's support for the emergency declared a month ago all over the city. They had made no impression on him. The walls had erupted with predictable regularity into the violent poster paint. Some of them covered announcement hailing a coup. Some of them told

about the return of an old prophet or the rise of a new messiah. The situation was said to be very tense :

Almost any shoot-out was labeled revolution, even if all it changed was the clique at the top for another clique at the top. Political convulsions left him cold and political clichés bored him. He had no trouble avoiding controversy in the host country as he had been told to do. (8)

The people are talking about a month's censorship. Those who have experienced and lived under it say that it kills all curiosity. One month is enough for an artificial silence to start exploiting:

The facts it is trying to conceal shriek out to be noticed - since June 26th officially all was well, but it was impossible not to be aware of the sullenness building up along New Delhi's heavily policed roads and news travelled from the old city of rioting when tenements were torn from under slum dwellers and they were packed off out of sight to distant locations. It did not need much imagination to sense, the hate and fear inside the vans with iron barred window, like the ones used for collecting stray dogs for drowning that now roamed the streets picking up citizens for vasectomy. (8)

Thus, Sahgal's articles and novels are both a record of the contemporary political events and a commentary on them. They enable us to understand and evaluate the political happenings of her novels better. The two sides of work are not separate or divided, they together represent her views and opinions, what is more important is the form of protest she keeps alive in her fiction, the refusal to accept a political action simply on the basis of its intention and persistence to relate the action to its result. She is critical like of the inhibiting mental approach as of the disruptive violence approach. The supreme test she applies to a situation is how far it furthers the cause of individual freedom and growth and how far it is conducive to self-respect. There is no action or step or achievement which can be considered as a terminating point, especially in the political field. Freedom is not a gift, it is an achievement and every generation has to do its job well in order to continue and preserve the tradition of freedom. The threat to freedom is always dangerous for a country and no action of an individual should pose a threat to it.

Throughout Sahgal's work there is continuity. The novels are unified first by their background of recent Indian politics. To whatever extent this is historically accurate, the theme of political struggle is clearly one of her major concerns. Secondly, we are aware of her division of the world into the aggressors and the non-aggressors, the active and the thoughtful, those whose main interest is richer

and more powerful and those who care for justice and moderation. Finally, growing out of both of these concerns is her awareness of the need for woman to become equal partners in the struggle to protect those values which allow human beings to live together in mutual respect. Thus, it is a social document.

Nayantara's work is different from the work of most of her contemporaries in the field of Indian-English fiction in several ways. For instance she does treat the East-West theme as do Raja Rao and Kamala Markandaya, but it is not a confrontation between two sets of values or a value judgment on any one of them. The foreigners in her novels are not very important characters. Her social and cultural milieu has always been Indian. It is not possible to categorize her values as a simple confrontation between tradition and modernity for there is much in tradition that she values and great deal in modernity she admires. For her the test of a value lies in freedom and growth related to a sense of fulfilment. Her major contribution to the art of fiction in Indian English writing is the genesis of the political novel in its present form. Her main contribution has been her deep involvement and concern with politics. She has developed the scope of the political novel, widening its area of content and adding a new dimension to it. Politics, in her novels, is not the concerns only of politicians, but in an all pervasive influence, affecting life at all levels. Her interest is not limited to a single political event, or an historical fact or the life of a politician, or even one predominant trend. It goes beyond this to envelop the totality of politics. Other writers have set out with limited or specific ends in view. Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* attempts to project the human tragedy of the partition while Manohar Malgonkar in *A Bend in the Ganges* is concerned with revolution and the opportunistic nature of revolutionaries. In *The Princess* Malgonkar's concern is with the collision between the old and the new and *The Devil's Wind* is a historical novel. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* captures a moment in history and the response of a nation to an ideal state and Bhabani Bhattacharya's concern in *Shadow from Ladakh* is with the limited aspect of Indo-China war and the consequent rethinking over Gandhian ideas.

In conclusion we can say that Sahgal's eight novels thus not only constitute an impressive segment of the Indian English novel but also sum up the saga of India's struggle for freedom and the change it has brought about in the traditional social set-up in India. Although Sahgal is unique in her artistic sensibility as well as in her particular manner of projecting national and historical consciousness, she also reflects the consciousness of change and the strange and sudden ways in which it has come to shape the character of individuals and the temper of the collective life as well as the competing structure of human values and human destiny. The major legacy of cultural change in modern India has been the new political sense containing in itself a feeling for the past as well as an awareness of the future, as both dramatise in the personality of the present. The climate of ideas that one encounters in her novel exemplifies cross-cultural imagination. Her art of

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characterization, style of writing, the use of language, irony, humour and satire are
lucid, exotic, accurate and very expressive. The use of these literary devices makes
her creative on the literary scene for the last three decades with strong realistic
base and reflects not only her personal value but also the changing values of a
society for the first time to both freedom and power.

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