

An Analytical Study of Nayantara Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh*

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Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps the only Indo-English woman novelist who is also a political columnist. Her newspaper articles are characterised by their topicality, simplicity and boldness. Nayantara Sahgal's work ranges from factual and emotional autobiography to fictionalised autobiography. In her address to the colloquium at Radcliffe Institute she had this to say about the close link in her life and writings:

I grew up during the national movement. My parents went to jail repeatedly during our fight for freedom. My father died as a result of his last imprisonment, released too late to be cured of the serious illness he contacted in jail. My uncle became our first Prime Minister. I was born and brought up within the atmosphere and hopes and ideals of the Congress party. Its leaders were familiar to me. Our home was their meeting place and many decisions, momentous to India were taken in it. I became a novelist and political journalist, and all my writings, fiction and non-fiction, have been about contemporary India. (*Voices From Freedom* 5)

Storm in Chandigarh is one of the best political novels written by an Indian in English. It deals with the partition of East Punjab on linguistic lines just when the state had recovered from the trauma of the 1947 partition, warring factions and the restoration of peace and harmony among the people of Chandigarh. The fight between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is a fight of ideologies. It is a fight between the cult of violence and the ideal of non-violence. Nayantara Sahgal brings out the evils of hypocrisy, pretence and snobbery, existing at the human level. As Jain remarks:

Sahgal's work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of

the society exposed for the first time to both freedom and power. (Jain 32)

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Vishal Dubey, the young intellectual Indian administrative officer, is the protagonist whose point of view remains fairly constant throughout the novel. Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab and Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of Haryana together with the Home Minister of Union Government in New Delhi act out their political roles. Prasad, Trivedi and Kachru complete the set of Civil servants, who fully represent the bureaucracy in the central Secretariat, both old and new. The most important and interesting characters are, however, neither the politicians nor the civil servants except Dubey but the well-to-do business magnates and their high living and thinking executives.

The novel opens with the Union Home Minister's statement, "Violence lies very close to the surface in the Punjab". (*Storm in Chandigarh* 12) Violence that was so common a feature on the national scene during the sixties, that becomes the central concern in *Storm in Chandigarh*. As mentioned:

Outbursts of brutal, calculated violence had become a feature of the cities. There were too many in the congestion and chaos who had nothing to lose by violence, too many others 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... Violence had become routine and unexpected. It was given different names – indiscipline, unrest, disorder. It was dealt with each time and forgotten. The confrontation between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is more significant than a mere clash of personalities. It is, more fundamentally, a conflict of ideas - the cult of violence and the creed of non-violence.(14)

Gyan Singh, who symbolises the former, is a political murderer in league with the very devil of money and power. A call for a general strike is his characteristic way of demonstrating strength. Due to the strike, how the

uncertainties of general life consequent on political machination are depicted nicely by the novelist. As Saroj puts it succinctly:

Oh, I'm not worried about any great disaster. I'm afraid of usual things going wrong, like milk not being delivered and my tins and packets running short, and the iron not working and not being able to get it repaired. It's when ordinary things go off the rails that life becomes unbelievable. (167)

In contrast, Harpal Singh has always counseled caution which continues to be the watchword in his career. A stout-hearted integrationist, he is the political counterfoil to Gyan Singh in all matters. He is easily altruistic where Gyan could be cynically egoistic. As he himself recalls introspectively that he could not remember a time when he had wanted power. What he had passionately wanted was recognition as a champion of the underdogs. And he had earned that. The one stands for opportunist, shrewd and diplomatic politician, whereas the other stands for justice, broader perspective and liberal outlook. Vishal evaluates the political situation as well as the principal characters.

Nayantara Sahgal firmly believes that the fate of the three patriarchal institutions – the family, the society and the state are interrelated because co-operation between the family and the larger society is essential, else both would fall apart. Sahgal in the novel chooses, as said by Narendra:

An important juncture in history of India is a vantage point to juxtapose the past and the present in order to review the progress of contemporary generation. (Narendra 76)

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Chandigarh is very much symbolic of its practical approach to the problem of violence in all the three patriarchal institutions. Chandigarh, designed by Le Corbusier, ironically juxtaposes the puniness of the people and the grandeur of the architectural patterns thereby questioning how successful democracy is, superimposed on illiterate masses, exploding millions of them. Mrs. Sahgal describes the emergence of Gyan Singh as an invincible force in the national politics. Gyan Singh is an appropriate representative of those people, who have no feel for the periphery of a problem, for light and shade and the nuances

in between that is the source of their energy, and in a queer way, their integrity. Sahgal has also focused on the society how it is divided into classes. The Indian constitution proclaimed that socialism is going to be upheld, the unequal distribution of wealth created a gulf between haves and have-nots. Inder, the mill owner thinks only about efficiency and productivity. But he cannot sympathise with the workers who protest against the canteen arrangements and become furious when they find out that they are given pigs' food, shipped from America. Jit, another industrialist also comments:

When the men are roused they don't just want a bonus or an adjustment of pay scales, they want your blood if they can have it...Why don't they get their terms straight? How can they expect a bonus unless the company makes a profit? But profit or no profit, it's a bonus they want. The trade unions should dream up another name for their next demand. (*Storm in Chandigarh* 36)

Storm in Chandigarh deals basically with the problem of political tension and violence originating from its being Chandigarh, the common capital of the two states – the Punjab and Haryana, modern features of Indian society. Values are something that one lives by and every culture is endowed with eternal values, which it seeks to reestablish continuously. Whenever there is a threat – external or internal to these values, individuals as well as nations undertake a frantic search for values. The enormity of threat determines the intensity of search. As the novelist writes:

It is a search for value...the better value, the real value in any situation, and not just do what is done or what is expected. (82)

The novel also makes an attempt to explore the labyrinths of the post-colonial Indian psyche from the socio-political and personal levels of existence. As economic structure of the country and also in order to legitimise this change it propagated the superiority of human individual. Susie Tharu points out:

No aspect of life in our country has been unaffected by colonialism. It disrupted

existing social and economic structures, undermined the political system, forcibly retarded growth and inevitably in the process divested traditional institutions and values of their function in society.
(Tharu 24)

In doing so the colonial rule also negated the existence of traditional values as Frantk Fanon points out:

Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values... The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. (Fanon 32)

Moreover, Chandigarh stands as a very important symbol. It embodied a dream of progress and perfection. But the ensuing storm signifying an erosion of those dreams proves that any attempt at imposition of order and balance from outside is a mere illusion and it is only a matter of time before the whole façade crumbles down. The Chandigarh architecture becomes synonymous with Indian democracy.

Sahgal has woven the political consciousness into the total fabric of the novel more skillfully. In this novel “storm” is directly related with the political situation of the bifurcation of the Punjab into Punjab and Haryana with Chandigarh as a common capital. Portraying the actual situation in 1960 of the separation of Punjab and Haryana, *Storm in Chandigarh* builds on another situation of post-independence chaos for the acquisition of Chandigarh as the capital of the Punjab. In this process, the Gandhian value of non-violence is put to the acid test. The novelist here concentrates on the artistic value of violence in the context of political events. As A. V. Krishna Rao observes :

Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps one of our best socio-political novelists of today. She is authentic and vivid in rendering the contemporary Indian urban culture with all its inherent contradictions and imposed controversies. (Krishna Rao 6)

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