

Nayantara Sahgal : The Woman Novelist Par Excellence

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Women down the ages have tried their level best to clinch for themselves a permanent niche in every sphere of life braving all odds. The literary world did not remain untouched. Women writers of every language have acquired remarkable recognition in every part of the world. Their talent and skill helped women to reach to enviable heights in almost every sphere of life and society has been forced to bow in appreciation of their calibre. As Rao recognises:

Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound.
woman is the microcosm of the mind...to
Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni,
to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is
Radha. Woman is the meaning of the
world. She is the daughter of the earth,
the queen and the woman is the world
(Rao 357)

The emergence of Indian women writers in the literary landscape of Indian writing in English, is a landmark. Their works explored new domains of insights, illuminated new horizons and drew the attention to the social realities through a different outlook. Purabi Shridhar has rightly observed that Indian women authors and poets are becoming increasingly visible and vocal.

What is noteworthy, however, is that writing has not happened suddenly to Indian authors. They have been writing for decades- from Ismat Chughtai, Krishna Sobti, Kusum Ansal, Kamala Das, Mahashweta Devi, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc.

One special point should be noted. No man can know the intimate life of the Indian people. He cannot even enter the heart of India – the women's quarters- much less gain the confidence and affection of their inmates. (Shriwadkar 7)

Nayantara Sahgal, the daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Ranjit Sitaram Pandit was born on 10th May, 1927 in Allahabad. Second of the three daughters, Nayantara was a child of rich heritage.

Growing up in the ambience of Anand Bhawan, amidst hectic political activities, arrests of the parents, visits by the police, long periods of silence, politics entered her life quite early. There is a touching candour as she describes her political awareness as one of the most significant aspects of her early life :

With us the growth of political awareness
was a gradual and unconscious process
and the most important influence on our
lives. (*Prison and Chocolate Cake* 31)

To her, India's struggle for independence represented a momentous phase in the Nation's history in which her family participated in a major way. She too, contributed her bit by accepting the several unusual events of her life as matters of normal texture.

The presence of older generation in the family helped Nayantara Sahgal to have a healthy childhood. Fond memories of her loving grandmother, and strict disciplinarian, 'Nanima' and the story-telling sessions of her grand aunt, 'Bibima' have helped considerably in the formation of permanent impressions on Sahgal. She cannot overlook the advantages of a big family and correctly thinks :

A big family...cushioned you against
shocks, put ups and downs into focus.
was simply there, a broad soft bosom.
(*A Situation in New Delhi* 43)

Several influences moulded the personality of Nayantara Sahgal who succeeded in acquiring the distinction of being one of the best writers, India has ever produced. She grew up into a mature, balanced human being living up to the values of freedom and possessing a broad humanistic approach to life and its innumerable pains and pleasures. The consciousness of her being an Indian did not limit her views. On the contrary, growing up in the best tradition of an Indian home enlarged her vision and outlook. She was convinced that the freedom to think, to write, to be is what life is all about. From her family's "hunger for freedom" (*Treatment of an Indo-Anglian Writer* 17). Nayantara has learnt :

Freedom was a cherished possession
belligerently defended. (18)

It is rightly believed that an irrefutable bond exists between a writer's life and his work . In case of Nayantara Sahgal ,it is more intimate and deep than ordinary because her works range from factual and emotional autobiographies to fictionalised autobiographies. The novels of Sahgal constitute an impressive core of the modern English fiction in India . There is a marked development in the themes of Sahgal. M.N. Sharma has rightly observed :

Even a hurried reading of Nayantara Sahgal's novels clearly manifests that there is a definite line of development to be traced between *A Time to be Happy* and *The Day in Shadow*. (Sharma 37)

Nayantara Sahgal is considered as one of the best socio- political novelists today. She is authentic and vivid in rendering the contemporary urban culture with all its inherent contradictions and imposed controversies. She writes quite consciously with a sense of profound personal pleasure in a creative exploration and release. The influences of Nehru and Gandhi and their philosophy are distinct in her works. She believes like her father :

...Politics is not merely a matter for politicians. They are the vital concern of every sensitive and thinking person. (*Prison and Chocolate Cake* 42)

Sahgal has been active on the literary scene both as a creative writer and political columnist for more than two decades and has the unique distinction of being the only political novelist of the Indo- 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 the first time to both freedom and power. The struggle is not between the old and the new but between dedication and power. Hers is the conscience of a liberal spirit of a non- conformist. Irving Howe feels :

Like a nimble dialectician, the political novelist must be able to handle several ideas at once, to see them in their hostile yet independent relations and to grasp the way in which ideas in the novel are transformed into something other than

the ideas of a political programme.
(Howe 21)

Nayantara Sahgal proved the truth of these words, Her views on politics and political occurrences and events seem prophetic because of her conviction that the human being is the basis for all action whether good or bad. The means to make human life more meaningful, according to Sahgal, are freedom, fulfilment and communication. Nayantara 's works are soaked with facts of the political upheaval both before and after the independence. *Storm in Chandigarh* presents the political background during the division of Punjab into the two states – Punjab and Haryana. *A Situation in Delhi* deals with the aftermath of Nehru's death, the naxalite movement and the sudden unrest. etc. However, while presenting the political scenario before and after independence, she happens to throw light on certain pressing social issues which stirred the conscience of the readers. The political ambience is beautifully blended with the social consciousness of the writer as she depicts the effects of the decisions of leaders on society at large. *Rich Like Us* is an open assessment of the emergency regime of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the adverse effect of it on socialism.

Sahgal's writings have a genuine concern for human values and human beings. Her characters come alive as individuals to their surrounding, her ideas are consistent, yet not obtrusive in their impact on the readers. What makes her novels specially enjoyable and meaningful is the viewing of them in their totality. It is the fragmented approach to her work which has come in the way of her acquiring instant success. Critics normally have felt contented viewing her either as a journalist or a writer of the ironic mode. Another factor that hindered an objective assessment of her works is the predominance of autobiographical elements in her novels.

It, however, becomes highly imperative that her works be freed from narrow categorisation. Her novels reveal a deep understanding of the Indian situation and while recognising the near desperate condition of its masses, persist in an almost idealistic belief in the human being. What makes her stand out is that she is not the only one to combine journalism and creative writing, she is the only one to inter-relate and strengthen the two by a common concern.

Women, trying to discover and fulfil her emotional needs, form one of the major themes of her novels. Leela in *This Time of Morning* and Madhu in *A Situation in Delhi*, refuse orthodoxy and commit suicide.

Being a woman herself, Nayantara had a brilliant insight into the inner recesses of the woman's mind with all its complexities. The eagerness of the women to be liberated from the plethora of problems plaguing their lives and the shackles imposed on them by the male dominated society, form part of the writing from the pen of this great novelist. Maya, Kusum, Lalita in *A Time To Be Happy*, Nita in *This Time of Morning*, Gauri in *Storm in Chandigarh* etc. are some of her women characters who seek to break away from the bondages of every kind.

The novels of Nayantara Sahgal are coloured by the softer elements and the dry themes, such as violence and political turmoil are prevented from being shrill. The emotional crisis, mental swings and the myriad of sense elements related to the characters are depicted in the works of Sahgal. Rakesh in *This Time of Morning* is caught up in a whirl of social life, careerism, politics and intrigue; Vishal in *Storm in Chandigarh* undergoes emotional crisis after his wife's death and finally tries to derive a furtive satisfaction in a liaison with the wife of a businessman.

Going hand in hand with themes related to politics and women psychology is Sahgal's own project for post colonial life of the sub continent, expressed through her novels. She stakes her claim on another kind of India shaped by a socialist project adapted to the realities of the sub continent. She inscribed in her texts the "human cost" as discarded side effects of the business "at top". We can, therefore, claim that she portrays India in a state under a sort of home colonialism, whose freedom and borders are still at stake. Her resistance against the current corruption of the ideals of independence and the behaviour of the government is registered through the social criticism projected in her novels.

Combining history and fiction in a contemporary cocktail is a herculean task. It becomes more pronounced when the novels not only delve into acrimonious issues such as the freedom struggle and the political chaos but unveils dissonance in the prevailing ideologies such as religious fundamentalism and non-violence, legacies we grapple with till today. In the process of dramatizing the political scenario, Nayantara displays a reasoned approach of a historian.

As an Indian she shares the common India sensibility of Indo-Anglian writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai etc, but the ideas she presents are radically her own. She is neither a traditional nor a modernist. She can well be described as an "individualist". This is more so because Nayantara Sahgal is a unique product of family heritage, traditional Indian

upbringing, powerful political and literary influence and American education, where she also encountered the contagious influence of the Russian author, Vladimir Nabokov. Adding to this is the historical significance of the period which saw the birth of a new and independent India.

Over the years, Nayantara has hewed out for herself a firm place in Indian literature, especially in her later writings, as she has ventured far beyond the myths and realities of being an Indian woman. Her works received worldwide acclaim and she became the proud recipient of the highest national literary award, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Commonwealth Prize, the very year it was constituted. She has also been elected to the Distinguished Alumni Roll in recognition of her lifetime achievement as a writer of elegantly crafted works of both fiction and non fiction. Jasbir Jain points out that she has also held writing assignments abroad, saying :

She (Nayantara Sahgal) was writer in residence twice at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, U.S.A. first in 1973 and again in 1977. (Jain 17-18)

It is, indeed, a pity that considering the vast range of Sahgal's writings and achievements abroad, she has not received much critical attention in India. 'The Illustrated Weekly of India' pointed this out in its own way by saying :

So obsessed is the media with the ruling Nehru family that it forgets the presence of other luminaries in the clan. Like Nayantara Sahgal for instance, Mrs G's first cousin is often probed for her candid opinion about the dynasty rather than her literary work. In fact few people know that Vijayalakshmi Pandit's writer - daughter has just won the 1984 Sinclair Lewis prize for literature (41)

What Nayantara Sahgal has achieved for Indo-Anglian fiction is the success of the down to earth attitude as a narrative technique combined with a solid intellectual content. In her hands the political novel has come

of age. It must, however, be noted that her works are not mere catalogues of political events but have much finesse and refinement that make her worthy of being regarded as one of the most impressive Indian writers in English Literature. An indepth study of the various aspects of her style and presentations enables us to safely conclude that she is an artist par excellence.

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