

POLITICS AS AN INHERENT ELEMENT IN SAHGAL'S FICTION

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Abstract:

The function of literature is to catch the historical reality of the time, the spirit of society, expression of individualism and foreshadows of time. It represents the seething frustrations of the age and records the rebellious spirit. Every age has its own culture and in it resides the social ethos of the community. Any culture is the composite whole of various tendencies accepted and practised by the people in a particular society. The commonality does not question it but literary man does it with all his thinking, imagination and new ferment of ideas.

Mostly exploitation is resented by the writers and as such new ideas of social interest are forged by them. It happened in the days of the French Revolution. The banner displaying 'Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity' let the people fight against the monarchy. It was the result of the writers penning resentment against the monarchy and aristocracy. The organic nature of art makes it draw nourishment from diverse sources including politics, taken in its wider element of sense as embracing the multiplicity of contemporary scene with its economic, social and cultural aspects.

*Nayantara Sahgal has a rare distinction of being the first Indian woman novelist writing in English, dealing with political themes. Starting her literary career in 1954, with her autobiographical work, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), she has written novels and journalistic columns for newspapers, delineating the contemporary Indian political scene between India's freedom and the declaration of emergency. She convincingly shows the changes occurred in India with the advent of freedom and the new challenges, hopes and aspirations of the people.*

Key words: *Politics, liberty, equality, freedom.*

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The soil which nurtures optimistic talent is the culture of the people, the tastes, spiritual demands and life of the artist's contemporaries. In other words the artist is only the co-author of a magnificent creation known as the culture of the people.¹

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The relationship between politics and literature has been an interesting field of study. Irving Howe,

whose *Politics and the Novel* is considered the locus classicus on the subject, casts more than enough scepticism on the impulse to assign literary labels and does not call his book a political novel. According to him,

By a political novel I mean a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or the political milieu is the dominant setting....²

In certain aspects, the political novel resembles the historical novel. A historical novel can be designated as a political novel when it specifies and directly deals with political history. A political novel is constricted to political aspects of history, whereas historical novel extends beyond political terrain, to social, cultural, moral and economic aspects of history. The political novel attains broader dimensions than a historical novel as it moves beyond history and addresses itself to living political problems, ideas and ideologies.

It has been noticed that a few Indian novelists have set their narratives in the recent historical and political milieu, skilfully weaving significant political happenings there in. A novelist opts for a factual background in order to find an order in the seeming welter of history. The very act of weaving a narrative in such a background is an act imbued with political consciousness and the novel assumes great significance as a political chronicle.

Nayantara Sahgal has chosen to write against a political background because she grew up in an atmosphere oozing with political fermentation. It is justifiable to say, to use the words of M.L. Malhotra, "That politics and Sahgal are cousins or if a metaphor can convey it forcefully, Siamese twins."⁵ Sahgal's concern with the political themes and issues of current importance has been readily acknowledged. Whereas the most critics have treated her as just, "Another novelist to treat the political issues of the time."⁶

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I deal with people and their situations but, looking back, each one seems to reflect the hopes and fears the political scene held out to us at that time.⁷

Politics is the forte of Nayantara Sahgal. As she is the daughter of Ranjith Pandit, a distinguished freedom fighter and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, a remarkable woman who held important positions in national life as well as abroad. She is also the raven-eyed niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, the lieutenant of the non-align movement. Politics is her background and her environment and it becomes her natural material. In the preface to *'Prison and Chocolate Cake'* Sahgal writes,

We grew up at a time when India was the stage for a great political drama and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performance we have seen.⁸

Later in the same book, she says,

With us, the growth of political awareness was gradual and unconscious process and the most important influence in our lives.⁹

She herself explains that politics is embedded in her "bones and marrow"¹⁰ and in her "emotional and intellectual makeup."¹¹ To such an extent that she can no longer remain a mere passive spectator to the happenings with far-reaching fall-out affecting vital human interests.

Sahgal vividly describes the malaise of her time and illustrates it with her firsthand knowledge and her keen observation of the work of politicians. She analyses and interprets the various political events with perceptive mind and presents the individual responses to these events through her characters. She traces the growth and development of the individual consciousness against the backdrop of the changing

political and social turmoils. Her protagonists respond fearlessly to the challenges of changes in the society they live in and move towards self realization. They, in each novel, project the views of the novelist on the latest political events.

Storm in Chandigarh, Sahgal's third novel, is a metaphorical projection of the theme of political violence everywhere in the Punjab and Haryana showing psychological impact on the minds of individuals. The bifurcation of Punjab into Haryana and Punjab on the linguistic basis nearly twenty years after the first partition based on religion is the situation in *the novel*. Political tension between the two newly carved states regarding the boundaries, water and electricity is the theme and as the capital of two newly formed states, Chandigarh is the stage for action. The novel depicts the conflict between the opposite forces, Gyansingh and Haspal singh, Chief ministers of the Punjab and Haryana respectively.

Gyan singh, the ambitious politician, can come to immediate grips with a situation and manipulates it to suit himself. He never hesitates to use violence as a means if it can bring quick results. Sahgal agrees, "Fiction often over shadows fact."²⁰

She is well aware of the anticipatory nature of her perceptive political analysis in her novel. In the words of a critic,

Storm in Chandigarh' based on the second division of the Punjab and the creation of Haryana state, with both... demanding Chandigarh as the capital was written a year or more before this even come to pass.²¹

His megalomaniac visions of grandeur, glory and supreme strength have to be realised only in a negative sense. He instigates the people and calls for a general strike to demonstrate his strength. Dubey, the liaison officer sent to resolve the crisis between the warring states, says,

What Gyan plans is a demonstration to show the strength of his demands. He'll call it off once he makes his point. It's a political trick, not a mass movement. (167)

In contrast to Gyan Singh, Harpal Singh has always counselled non-violence which becomes his watchword in his career. He has tremendous faith in the Gandhian idea of non-violence. As a stout integrationist, he expresses his deep anguish over the division of Punjab... He is altruistic in nature where as Gyan singh could be cynically egoistic

Dubey asks Harpal singh to "make a stand" (211) as part of his strategy for aborting Gyan singh's planned strike at the Bhakra dam. He says,

It's a risk,.... but there are greater risks the prospect of the machinery of two states running down at the behest of one man, without any kind of stand made against him... and that a man who believes, and correctly that he has only to call the tune. There is no room for such men among us. Let us take the risk. (212)

The political storm gathers momentum with the incidents like the violence that breaks out in the factory and the strike by the electricity men. Vishal Dubey suggests that he has to take a stand against the violent attitude of Gyan Singh.

Sahgal portrays the disintegration of values in politics and feels that Democracy has become a power game into which carnal savagery and machiovellian strategy have crept in. She strongly asserts that it is the conscious moral obligation of all right thinking people to protest against non-violence and injustice.

The novel concludes when Gyan Singh calls off the strike at the sudden demise of the union Home minister, the only surviving Gandhian in the Union cabinet. Thus, the storm is only temporarily mitigated. It is obvious that Gyan Singh calls off the strike only to save his own image, not because of his respect for the deceased Home minister. Finally, Vishal Dubay with his shrewed insight succeeds in restoring law and order in violence ridden Chandigarh.

A Situation in New Delhi presents a disturbingly realistic picture of Delhi in post- independence

era. Sahgal dwells on the failure of political machinery in the absence of a good leader. The novel also exposes corruption and opportunism in a seemingly democratic government. She describes the all pervading influence of Shiv Raj, the deceased Prime minister who in many respects resembles her uncle Nehru and points out that there is every need for a rededication to the values for which he stood for. But she expresses her deep concern for the decadence of values in Indian democracy in the post Nehru era. She herself felt the apathy, and a lot of hostility of the Government when her novel, *A Situation in New Delhi* was not allowed to be published during the emergency.

Devi, the education minister was disgruntled with the way government machinery functioned once the charismatic Prime Minister, Shiv Raj, her brother was no more. She felt humiliated to work with such opportunistic colleagues who did not possess an iota of his sobriety. She resigns to her post as she resembles Sahgal's bold women in other novels, those who walk out of suffocating situation, no matter what the price. She is determined to continue her brother's legacy of preserving national values.

Usman Ali, the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University, is hurt grievously in a student demonstration organized in protest against the expulsion of the students, responsible for the rape of a girl on the university campus. He submits a document in which he simply supports the recommendations of the commission appointed by Shiv Raj. He makes his point very clear that there is a dire need for providing outlets for skill enhancement before a student leaves the university. He also recommends to put an end to the mushroom growth of new universities. But the Government rejects his document on the ground that it ignores socio-economic implications. The student unrest and political intervention in the educational institutions compel him to resign to his post. Devi also joins Usman to start political campaign against the corrupt regime.

Usman is depicted in this passage as a warrior ready to battle with the gathering arsenal ranged against him. The political message of this novel is that one must do one's duty. To do nothing, as Krishna explained to Arjuna, is to fail in one's duty. It is in the light of this duty that Usman takes '*non-violent revolution*' (P.146) to the streets.

A Situation in New Delhi thus runs almost like an allegory depicting the after math of political and national scene after the demise of Shiv Raj. Sahgal graphically paints political and human fall out during the emergency in *Rich Like Us*. The novel also chronicles the past to demonstrate the sea - change which the leaders, their means, sense of ends, and also the institutions have undergone. The silence has prevailed over the nation as the trade unions were banned, the press got suppressed and bureaucracy politicised after the promulgation of emergency. Sehgal reminds us of the British regime where the basic human rights were curbed during freedom struggle. She makes references to Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement to create an environment to face the present transgression, the proclamation of emergency. Gandhiji vehemently opposed the inhuman attitude of the British and stressed the importance of civil liberty in social life.

Civil liberty consistent with the observance of non-violence is the first step towards Swaraj. It is the breath of political and social life. It is the foundation of freedom. There is no room for dilution or compromise. It is the water of life.²⁴

Sahgal like Gandhiji is perhaps one of the most outspoken and impassioned champion of the civil and political rights of the people during the emergency. She stands as one of the intellectuals who fought for the restoration of democracy and human rights. She vehemently opposed press censorship and imprisonment of leaders without trial. As a measure of protest, she resigned from the executive committee of the Authors' Guild of India as well as the Sahitya Akademi Advisory Board. In a hard hitting letter of resignation, she wrote :

We are not faced with a 'Political' issue in a normal political situation. We are faced with a dictatorship which was ruthlessly demonstrated its policies and intentions... The emergency has made it clear, if any clarity was needed, what kind of government we are

dealing with in its naked disregard of democratic functioning and human rights.... I hope this situation will change but no change is brought about by a servile population and certainly not by educated elite that falls in line with every excess a dictatorship commits. I am very certain that I can be no party of this.²⁵

Sahgal portrays the facts of emergency through her fictional characters in *Rich Like Us*. The locale is once again New Delhi, where politics is always the undercurrent of life. The promulgation of emergency on the pretext of saving the country from anti-national and anti-social forces is nothing short of reversal of all the spirit of the renaissance in the pre-independence era. During the emergency, the Gandhian humanistic approach is completely eliminated and many of the intellectuals were compelled to take part in a thinly disguised masquerade, setting the stage for family rule. Sahgal indirectly makes references to Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi and depicts them as Madam and her son. No one forgets the acts of Sanjay Gandhi during the emergency.

Dev, a young entrepreneur On the other hand establishes a company in collaboration with a foreign company and flourishes well as he has intimate connections and influence in the political circles. The civil servants like Ravi Kachru, who is a loyalist of the high command, the ruling party, have been elevated to the higher ranks where as those who tried to adhere to the norms, like Sonali, are demoted.

The two sides, politics and the service were hopelessly mixed, with politicians meddling in administration and officers like Kachru, the prime example, playing politics as if his life depended on it. Today, one finds live examples where officers either by loyalty to the ruling party or by succumbing to political pressures violate the administrative norms and ultimately are brought to the court.

Nayantara Sahgal's literary canvas in a broader sense is defined as personalized fiction, History, Politics, autobiographies, and personalities intermingle in her novels and establish her reputation as a political novelist with a rare prophetic foresight and sensitivity. Sahgal's success as a novelist lies in her ability to transmute the social, historical and political events of her time into the organic structure of the novel.

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