CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Art and society are linked by a very significant dialectical inter relationship. Art is an artist's endeavour to express artistically the complex web of environment of human beings. An artist endeavours to portray the human aspirations and problems, thoughts, emotions, losses and gains, hopes and despair, happiness and suffering. The vast arena of human life and situation has appealed to the artists since times immemorial. In painting, dance, music, and most significantly in writing, the artists have commented upon and expressed their perception of the enigmatic and bewildering reality of human life. Hence a social dimension to art is automatically added at the very time of its inception, its creation by the artist and its appreciation by the viewers. Art can be viewed as a response to the concerns, hopes and aspirations of real men suffering from either material deprivation or from social alienation, repression and disintegration of personality or from both. Art, it has now been accepted, is a legitimate forum for agonizing over the problems of man and society as well as reflecting, representing and recreating the world through creative imagination. Thus art may contest reality, as Albert Camus says but does not avoid it. Aesthetic criticism, may be viewed as a persistent open ended critique of culture and society from which it originates in the hands of these innovators.

The intimate relationship between the art and society is very clearly evident in literature as the literary works not only record the social reality of their time, but in several ways transcend it to project the realm of future possibilities. Literature, fundamentally is an artistic expression of the intricate web of circumstances of human existence. "Life, of course", observes Elizabeth Drew, "is the basic raw material of art, but no artist is so close to his raw material as the novelist. It's all around him all the time: people, incidents, scenes, sense impressions, curiosity, his excitement, his compulsion to transmit it into language and then relieve his own feelings and communicate them to others." A writer's creative imagination, endeavours to express the inner reality by creating a world of aesthetic, and human values. His sensibility reacts sharply to the contradictions and complexities in the socio-political and personal lives and expresses itself eloquently and artistically in the literary works he creates.
Hence literature might be seen as an individual's perspective of the social, the political, the economic and the cultural patterns of the times. N. Shamota, brilliantly captures the organic relationship of the artist and society:

The soil which nurtures artistic 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.5

Literature is thus organically related to the society in which it is produced as it is rooted in the reality of the times.6

Fiction, of all the literary forms, is the most vitally concerned with social conditions and values. It represents in the best precipitated form, what Hudson finds true of all literature, viz.,

a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an experience of life through the medium of language.7

Novel obviously has a more consciously articulated social relevance especially in a third world country. Novelists assume the role of visionaries as they consciously come to grips with issues agitating the minds of their readers. Novel, with the broad canvass has responded brilliantly to accommodate the socio-political consciousness of the writer. For Lawrence the novel is a very vital form of creative art, as it is the "only form of art or science" which focuses on the living man in his "entirety".7 Religion, sociology, philosophy and the politics contribute primarily to the conceptual content of literature. The novelist's work contains a judgement on what is right and what is wrong, howsoever, aloof from and indifferent to the race, the moment and milieu he may be. The novelist is supposed to embody and reflect the zeitgeist of which he is a keen observer. Caudwell in his essay "On Romance and Realism" brilliantly points out the socio-political roots of literary arts:

The traditions of art are not language traditions, but social traditions. Literary art therefore, has an essential feature - the use of associations gathered in shops, market places, friendly conversations, political speeches and quarrels. It is not surprising therefore, as literary art is conditioned at every step by social relations, because it is using the product of social relations, fabricated by the necessity of human co-operation.8

Nayantara Sahgal's work ranges from "factual and emotional autobiography to fictionalized autobiography" and it therefore cannot be but a natural outgrowth of the conditions around her. Thus a brief biographical sketch will be of immense assistance in a genuine appreciation of her novels. Born in Allahabad on May 10, 1927, she is the second of three daughters of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. Nayantara spent her childhood in Anand Bhawan at Allahabad with her parents, her maternal uncle Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, and her cousin Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The illustrious family background and the turbulent national environment left an indelible impression on the mind of Nayantara, as she herself acknowledges in her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake*:

> Our growing up was India's growing up into political maturity - a different kind of political maturity from any the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace.

(p 15)

Her family - parents, cousins, uncles and aunts were very actively engaged in the country's struggle for freedom and were at the centre-stage of the Indian politics - "All around them political and moral ideas were being discussed and formulated and the girls were a part of it. If it was Nehru's idealism which has influenced her political stance, it is her own father's gentleness and courage which has influenced her moral stance". She remembers Ranjit Pandit as a generous and understanding father who never allowed the inhibiting forces of society to enter his family life. He offered his companionship to his daughters, treating them as equals and explaining to them the complexities of contemporary political values. Nayantara was very attached to him and felt that in some inexplicable way her happiness and unhappiness were deeply bound up with his. She resembles him both in looks and temperament and has inherited from him her love of scholarship and sense of history and perhaps a little of his love for wide open spaces. He had the quite strength of gentleness and a great concern for the freedom of the human being, the ideals Nayantara learnt to value and uphold. She remembers her childhood as a time of freedom when:
I was conscious of being continually stretched in mind and spirit of being encouraged to be venturesome, of doing the daring rather than the timid thing, of taking risks rather than playing safe, and I was keenly aware of the joy of being myself, like every other person - a unique human being.17

After her schooling at Dwoodstock, a school managed by American missionaries at Mussorie, she along with her sister went to America for higher studies. She did her B.A in history from Wellesley College, Massachusetts; in 1947. Education in America widened the horizons and continued the lesson in independence and courage begun at home. Death of their father in 1944, gave a traumatic shock to Nayantara, the full impact of it she realised only on her return to India in October, 1947. Soon, she was attracted to an ambitious young man working in a British firm Gautam Sahgal who was not even remotely concerned with politics. Despite the tremendous differences in their background, Gautam and Nayantara got married in 1949. One can sense the underlying tension and the effort at adjustment in her second autobiographical piece From Fear Set Free, which she dedicated to Gautam and wrote at a time when she was still trying to make a success of her marriage. From the smallest detail to the overall picture, Gautam's world was new to her. It was a shift of values and a change from "the atmosphere of a political crusade to one of commerce" (Fear, p.53). Looking back in 1976, Nayantara candidly analyses her marriage:

For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality. A man's ego and ambition, I learned, must be served first. In case of conflict, the man's will and desire must prevail.... I was uneasy and restless adjusting to the demands of a personality and an environment whose goals and texture were different from anything I had known or been comfortable with.18

The unhappy marriage ended in a divorce in 1967. Talking about her unfortunate matrimonial alliance, Sahgal regrets: "I should not really have married when I did. I don't think I was cut out to marry young. One should take time to decide. I should and would have left marriage for much later. But society in India pressurizes girls to marry young".19 The personal agonies and traumas are reflected in the novels of Sahgal and the disharmony and dissolution of marriage becomes one of the major themes in her works. Kusum's unhappiness in A Time to be Happy reflects her own and the coming together of Sanad and Kusum is perhaps a wishful projection of her own desires.20 In her next novel, Morning, Rashmi feels smothered in her marriage to a businessman Dalip and in the end they are separated. Storm in Chandigarh and The Day in Shadow are emotional autobiographies. In Shadow, she purposely chooses an intelligent,
sensitive and aware woman, who is a writer and a freelance journalist, but who is shrewdly trapped in a brutal divorce settlement just like Sahgal herself in real life. Sahgal herself acknowledges:

In this book I tried to figure out something that has happened to me - the shattering experience of divorce.\(^2\)

In mid-sixties, Nayantara met E.N. Mangat Raj, a brilliant bureaucrat, in whom she found the much cherished companion. What followed was in her own words, ‘not an affair-but a revolution, a self discovery that life had to be lived more fully in order to be meaningful.'\(^2\)

In 1979, she married Mangat Rai, after many years of living together. Talking about her second marriage, she says: "Neither of us were at all interested in getting married. But in 1979, the Janata government appointed me ambassador to Italy and that forced me to marry.... Fundamentally, there is not much difference between living together and being married. If you are loyal to each other, it does not matter. If there is loyalty and trust, one does not need marriage".\(^2\)

Though the slice of autobiography is apparent in Sahgal’s work, yet, to view her works totally as subjective is erroneous since she has successfully transmuted personal experience into general one. Sahgal is of the opinion that "everything around the writer is material for a novel.... All one's material comes from real life ... one generally draws on one's own experience or some one else's experience".\(^4\)

Carefully distinguishing the role of a serious artist from that of a mere entertainer, she believes that the artist "has a mission... he has to create a vision of the future, he has to have a dream of his own and to suggest possibilities from it. I think it’s the artist’s job and the writer’s job particularly... to show the way". And she too shows the way unmistakably in each of her novels.

Enriched with the first-hand knowledge of India's politics, and the intense personal experiences of divorce, and remarriage, Sahgal passionately devoted herself to writing. In all her works there is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. She gives a memorable account of childhood impressions on her sensitive mind in her two autobiographies - *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1968). Since then she has consistently been engaged in writing novels and political columns and commentaries. She has established herself both as a creative writer and a political columnist. Her latest novel, *The Mistaken Identity* too has earned much critical acclaim for her.

This work proposes to take up all the novels of Nayantara Sahgal for an in-depth analysis, to explore the recurring thematic patterns in her corpus, focussing especially on their inter-relatedness. The chief thematic concerns of the novelist are: the political
theme, interpersonal relationship and the religion. Sahgal achieves remarkable success, in most of the novels in inter-relating her various thematic concerns viz. political, personal and religious, into an artistic amalgam.

Deep interest and first hand knowledge leads Sahgal to material for her novels from the Indian politics. She picks up for a realistic portrayal various political themes. She chronicles the Indian political History, realistically depicts the current political scenes, captures the shades of real-life politicians, studies bureaucrat vis-a-vis politicians. She analyzes the changing spectrum of Indian political scene and even foreshadows the future directions and decisions. She bases many of her novels on the true events of the Indian political scene. In her novels the various aspects of politics - the history, the personalities, the events, the currents and the cross-currents - are realistically depicted and thoroughly analyzed.

Nayantara Sahgal recreates and reconstructs the political events and environments relating to a period of nearly one hundred years of Modern Indian History from 1885-1985 in her eight novels. She ingeniously invokes the political milieu wherein her novels are set. A few remarkable dimensions of this aspect of her novels are: her perceptive analysis of the national scene; an in-depth presentation of the various political ideologies and ideas; her anticipation of probable escalation of germinal trends; and the creation as well as successful integration in her narrative of fictional characters with recognizable historical prototype. Sahgal's novels are important not only insofar as they present fictionalized history, but also in that they embody a perceptive analysis of the political process in its multifarious dimensions. Moreover, she delineates all the implications of different political stances in clash with each other in all their human implications, and also offers a strategy to fight the fissiparous forces and safeguard the rights of individual. In her novels, politics is not an incidental background or a side issue. Constituting the very heart of the matter, politics functions as the germinal nucleus fermenting the human story. The crowning glory of her novels is that as she presents political ideologies in a human idiom, her novels are never dry political tracts. The artistic weaving of political ideology in the lives of the characters, presentation of the politicians in their personal lives as well is her singular achievement. In most of her novels politics gets incorporated in the artistic fabric of the novel.

The portrayal of human relationships is one of Sahgal's chief thematic concerns. Sahgal excels in portraying marital, extramarital, premarital and inter-racial personal relationships. In her novels she explores the various dimensions and manifestations of
the man-woman relationship. Sahgal's particular strength lies in the probing analysis and sensitive portrayal of the subtle nuances of the most delicate and complex of the human relationships - the man-woman relationship. Her eight novels can be viewed as significant contributions, exploring dimensions of estrangement, confrontation and conflict, characterizing the man-woman relationship in the changing spectrum of values and attitudes. Sahgal excels in delineating psychological and personal turmoils and she studies them with keen perception and deep insight. Her almost uncanny grasp of human relations, her concern about the gender oppression and her subtle exposure of the marginalised and repressed position of woman in a male dominated society are reflected in her novels.

Religion is another recurring thematic concern of Sahgal, taken up for an exhaustive study. In her novels Nayantara Sahgal portrays the powerful influence of religion over the political life of a nation and the personal life of an individual - over the political values and emotional attitude of an individual. She points out that all religions, just as Hinduism at present, tend to become restrictive when the human touch is lost. She presents in detail the various inadequacies of Hinduism as a faith, "its baffling uncertainty; its duality, its obstinacy; its lack of clear compelling commandments;" its undemocratic cast, and rituals. Hindus seem to be imbued with a paralysing fatalism which makes them complacent, unambitious, meek and inactive, in their political as well as social and personal lives. This fatalism breeds inaction and meek acceptance of exploitation and corruption of ruthless, unscrupulous and corrupt politicians as well as tyrant and chauvinistic husbands with stoic resignation. Hinduism must adapt itself to the change in the environment of its adherents. Nayantara Sahgal, has at least one character in each novel re-interpreting the old religion.

This work also sets out to explore the various artistic strategies employed by the novelist to impart artistic unity, integrity and appeal to her various thematic concerns. Nayantara Sahgal shows signs of gradual maturity as a novelist expertly weaving her various concerns in an artistic amalgam, where each realm adds to and explains the other and forms a subtle artistic thematic pattern. Her novels reveal the intimate relationship of the political, social, personal and religious themes as political conditions, social attitudes and religions heritage define, to a large extent, the parameters of opportunity available to the individual for self-realization and condition his psychology and actions. Though the political motif appears to be the most dominant theme, yet the novelist tries hard to integrate it with the other thematic concerns viz. personal and religious, and most of the time she succeeds. Sahgal shows her dexterity in presenting her political and religious themes through a human idiom; thereby coalescing her three major concerns political, religious and domestic. She reiterates
vigorously the human factor in politics and at the same time she also 'humanizes' politics by making politicians swayed by human considerations. She presents politicians in personal relations in almost all her novels. The fine psychological portrayals of the public figures lays bare their inner motivation and complexes. A clever juxtaposition of the political and the personal makes the umbilical relationship of the two obvious. She not only makes the same issues cloud the horizon in the individual and the public life of her characters, but mostly the same protagonist presents the political and the domestic themes.

Sahgal succeeds remarkably in integrating the personal, the political and the religious into the psychological reality of man's mind and its way of working. Various other stylistic devices such as evocative symbols, sensitive and lyrical imagery, gentle irony and humour further enhance the charm and appeal of the novel rich with well-finished and "real characters and thought inspiring themes. Nayantara Sahgal presents a comprehensive view of life successfully going beyond the personal to the universal delineating sensitively and intelligently the various political and social and domestic issues in her novels of superb craftsmanship. Sahgal's eight novels have consolidated her position as an undoubtedly outstanding Indian English novelist. She maintains the precarious balance of the personal and the political, as would be revealed in the following chapters through an in-depth study of her various themes and the significant pattern they inevitably fall into.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


13. Ibid. p.156.


16. Ibid. p.12.


18. Ibid.


23. Dutt and H. Baweja *Probe* op.cit. p.17.
