Appendix

NAYANTARA SAHGAL
In Conversation

Dehradun
20 Nov. 1995
Interviewer : P.P. Ajayakumar

PPA Indian writing in English has already established a place in world literature. Being an Indian writer in English what are your views on the present status of Indian literature in English?

NS Nothing starts from now. Writers writing today have been built upon a foundation that is already there. Early writers like Sarojini Naidu and earlier writers who wrote during the colonial situation tried to find out their own voice. But what was heard was the official voice. The flowering of imagination began with independence movement which gathered momentum in the later part with the result that Indian writers in English have developed a voice of their own to express their own experiences.

PPA Indian Literature in English is often considered to be part of Third World Literature, which is different from the literature produced in European or Western countries. Being an imaginary production do you think it necessary to differentiate Third World Literature from the Eurocentred literature ?
There is so much genre nowadays. There is no such kind of language that only critics understand. They set the standard and we have to fit into that. So personally I feel that Third World Literature is part of the jargon. It has been constructed in the Western Academy. Majority of the people living in the formerly colonised countries are dumped in a double word, the "Third World". The West considers itself to be the first world, they consider the communist world the second world and the rest of the world become the Junk. Majority of the critics belong to the Western Academy. I do not know much about that. I am not part of any metropolis. I don't keep up with time, of desire.

Is that why you decided to settle in Dehradun, a hill station, far away from the metropolitan cities like Delhi?

Yes. But that is not all. This house is connected with my mother and it suited me to live here. So I keep myself away from what is considered to be trendy. So I am out of this whole format which critics use to explain using jargons. So I think the whole idea of Third World is absurd. I also think the whole idea of postcolonial makes no sense.

When do we stop being postcolonial? First we were colonial, now we are postcolonial. At some point that era has to end and the word colonial has to be dropped. So I don't see that we are living in an Anno Domini called postcolonial.
We are living in a world in which people are discovering their identity because when you speak of Third World writing including all those writers who twenty or thirty years ago settled abroad, In what way they relate to India? That is a very complex situation.

In my mind a man who has gone and settled abroad according to his wish and lives in happy circumstances in his own way is not an exile. The word exile should have a proper meaning. Those who are forced to flee like refugees, people under constraints, people who are kept away from their country, are considered to be exiles. I don't see any definition being applied to exile. At present it is used as a blanket term that applies to everybody; the millionaire, the affluent and the second generation of settlers or those who have just gone and are living in nostalgic conditions and so on.

It has been like the term Third World countries in which nations which are quite developed are put together with the under developed.

PPA  But the so called Third world nations, apart from their widely different socio-political and cultural priorities seem to present certain common preoccupations with regard to both theme and form.
True in the case of societies that lived under occupation or authoritarianism of any kind; take the countries of Latin America, countries under communist rule in Eastern Europe, in Africa and we ourselves lived under Empires for centuries; so the metaphor is used by all societies under constraints. It becomes a novel way of expressing what we cannot otherwise express. Irony becomes a way of expressing our mistrust and protest. Milton used such techniques against the monarchy. In such situations we find another way around the language.

Do you think that cultures affected by colonialism experience a duality?

Take India as example, what was the "brown sahib?" Not that we don't have them today. We had plenty of them during the time of Raj. The "brown sahibs" appeared wearing a mask to be accepted to the different classes to be recognised by the Raj. We were also educated abroad and used the mask. But our revolutionary parents told me that it is rubbish and we threw it. We spend our lives displacing it. So this is all that makes the duality.

People like Nirad C. Chaudhury express this extreme desire to identify with the West.

Even though they can never become whites, they can desperately want to.
A preoccupation with Indian politics and its development is evident in your novels. Moreover the confrontation between the ideals of the nationalist movement and authoritarianism during the postcolonial period is traced in novel after novel. What inspired you to do this? Why is there such a preoccupation with the nation?

Yes, I used to. There was a time when I spoke to myself of writing, but time and again I was reinforced in my conviction why nobody has done it. And it struck me, and I felt, this is also a kind of record that no body else has done similar, so that it will be useful only for that reason. I would like to make clear two points regarding the use of politics: one is that I don't write political novels, I write novels with political backdrops, back grounds or atmosphere in which a story takes place which is usually associated with the conflicts at the political level and the idealism being decayed but also the man woman relationship; second point I want to make clear is that the politics in our society, that is changing, where we are not actually established in democratic ways is associated with power. We are dealing at all levels with the concept of power -- whether at the public level or at the domestic level -- and anything which deals with power is politics. So in all changing societies the term apply to all political situations, at the public or domestic level. Whether they like it or not -- that is what we hear everyday -- millions of people become victims of power. So politics is a huge factor and it is there. In my case it has been the trigger which set off my imagination. I sometimes compared myself to a shoe maker's child who cannot get
away from the smell of shoe leather. Politics was like that for me. It was in my home, it was in my life it was in the question whether my father and mother will turn up tomorrow. We did not know what tomorrow would be. So, for us politics was not something to get rid off. There was not a single programme that is not connected with the freedom movement in my childhood. So what else could I write about?.

PPA You mean that politics is part of your personal development. Is there an undercurrent of politics in the personal relationships portrayed in your novels?

NS Yes, because I said politics means power, power comes into play in relationships including man woman relationships. As you know in India overwhelmingly so depending on the kind of level in which you act in the society.

PPA What really keeps women subdued?

NS It is the concept that man, his desires, ambitions and his personality are supreme and everything should revolve around that. So that the woman is forced to arrange her life according to that. Her abilities and talents also have to be suppressed inorder to fit into that situation.

PPA The betrayal of the nationalist government and the despair and agony that it created in the idealistic sensitive minds is a
Power corrupts and when one party sits in power for too long, corruption and decay creep in. This is also because there is no powerful opposition. We are not alone. In many nations like South Korea and Japan the rulers quit because of corruption charges. What is much more disappointing for us is that though we are supposed to be a democracy, even after forty nine years of independence we haven't learned to govern ourselves. It is very disappointing and it shows ultimately that culture has not come out of the colonial framework. Ultimately it is a cultural problem.

Can we call ourselves a true democracy? Do you think that we are successful in imitating the West?

It is true that we haven't educated our people. We neglected the basic education and went on to patronage the University education. I discussed this problem in one of my novels, *A Situation in New Delhi*. The misuse of reservation and the manipulation of this problem by political parties with an eye on the vote banks is the result of badly planned education.

In the last two novels you have gone back to the past breaking the progression. Was it a journey back to the past or a recreation of the present?
Even if you are looking at your own life you are not going to be looking at the real events in the past. So even autobiography suffers from that and fiction is never meant to be real. In my case eventhough I didn't plan it that way, looking back on it, I began to see that my novels were progressing in some logical order projecting an India that was contemporary in the post-independence period. And so to end therefore which represented the decline in idealism and ultimately the total decay of idealism which ended in the Emergency. It was bottom, the very end as far as idealism is concerned. So from there I could only take off to some other period. So it struck me there is a character who is outstanding before Gandhi. That started me on Plans for Departure in which I depicted Tilak's stand which is violent revolution, not non-violent, long before non-violence came onto the scene. In Mistaken Identity once again I went back to the past because during the time of conspiracy trials various kinds of people who have nothing in common politically were flung in, on charges of conspiracy against the government. I will be combining past and future in what I am writing, a new novel.

Can you elaborate upon this new novel?

I have written one. It is really part of a trilogy which will go back into the past and then come up to the present time of globalisation.
PPA  Considering the novels written so far *Mistaken Identity* is your masterpiece. Not just because of its vibrant, humorous style and technical perfection but also because of the complexity and eternal relevance of its theme. In it you seem to have lost faith in all sorts of ideologies.

NS  In *Mistaken Identity* you find two women, one Hindu, the other Muslim who are under strict purdah, dominated by a cultural situation. We find that they escape to freedom and find new lives. My stress is not on idealism but on the triumph of character, women who change their own lives especially becoming themselves within these cages, within the iron bar cages, they always struggle to get out. Bushan Singh's mother, the ranee has a temper which is sheer energy, and the girl Razia the teenage lover of Bushan is the one with a dynamic personality, sheer power. There is something in her, 'Sakthi' and I don't like to use that term with ethnic colour, which is used to please the western reader. But it is there.

PPA  Unlike many other novels in which Gandhian liberalism is presented as an emancipatory force, *Mistaken Identity* seems to negate political ideologies altogether. Does it mark a change in your vision?

NS  It has nothing to do with my personal view. But during colonial rule the opposition was many coloured, many stranded and it was that, a completely mixed group of characters who are put together in jail that makes the situation so funny. The
Communists and Gandhists, having different opinions are put together. The odd man out is Bhushan Singh who has nothing to do with all this. He is more interested in ball room dancing. A playboy, Bhushan stands for *Karma*.

Because you know he has committed a crime. He was searching for his beloved. He killed that man who married her. So his sentence is not for the conspiracy. It is his own *Karma*.

PPA *During the Arthur Ravenscroft memorial Lecture, delivered at the University of Leeds (18 February 1993) you observed that "My own novels are about how the idealism of an emergent nation has withered and rotted in corruption and decay." This comment presents a bleak picture. Don't you see any force emerging to rescue the nation from the present decadence?*

NS I am sorry to say that the present situation doesn't enable me to believe in any such force.

PPA *In most of your novels the main character subscribes to a liberal humanistic vision. Is it the author's own vision?*

NS It is my vision. I firmly believe in liberal values and not in any "ism". I never belonged to any political party, never joined any club, never. I did not even join the PEN. I like to feel free and I do believe in basic values like freedom, liberalism and humanism.