CHAPTER VII

Nayantara Sahgal’s Outlook On Life And The World

Every man of letters, as a result of deep meditation on life and world, forms. His own philosophy of life which he seeks to present through his works. Nayantara Sahgal’s profound knowledge of life and world acquired through a deep study of books and keen observation of life around her gets translated into aesthetic terms. in her novels. She has thought deeply over the subjects of religion, women’s problems in the contemporary society, importance of the individual in the scheme of progress, purity of ends and means, freedom, democracy, non-violence, etc. Her novels are the charmingly effective vehicles of her meditation on life and its problems. It was under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, who won the respect of even the opponents of his ideal of non-violence and whose name was a household word during India’s struggle for freedom, that Ms. Sahgal developed her moral vision which is embodied in her novels. According to her, “Life is to be lived according to certain ideals, standards and ethical ways of conduct, which... are right and they do get projected to some extent in one’s writings – journalistic or fictional.”

About the nature of her moral vision she says,

The idea of non-violence as a political technique which later caught on in the west and the idea of religious approach to politics was what influenced my moral vision as far as my mind goes.
But, then, the moral vision has not been, as it can never be static in all my novels. In the early novels after independence, when there was still this euphoria about freedom that the country had won, it was the intense feeling in what sense one can measure up to the ideals of the National Movement. Then there was a gradual sense of cynicism and decay as people did not measure up to the ideals. The vision of non-violence and the application of ethical standards in political behaviour as was advocated by Mahatma Gandhi had been of a very high level. But more often than not, after any sort of revolution, there is always a decline and that happened with us. The decline and the despair and the gathering clouds after freedom, the build-up of the totalitarianism which finally led to the climax of emergency, was the vision of the later novels up to Rich Like Us. That was a sort of chronological development, at every stage reflecting the hopes and fears of Indians. Then came emergency and that was the worst that could happen. It was there, I took off in time and my next novel was set in 1914 and the latest in 1929. The moral vision changes with The Mistaken Identity, its theme being the communal issue, an issue with religious fanaticism.²
In her latest novel, *Lesser Breeds*, as Jasbir Jain says, “The fantasisation of *Mistaken Identity* is transformed into a real life-size fairy tale – Gandhi’s faith in non-violence and the whole movement anchored in it. The novel moves between personal and political histories and the weaving together of a pattern of non-belief and faith.”3 The first part of the novel shows the effect of non-violence on a whole household and how a strong belief in this creed of non-violence makes of it a kind of strange household. In this way she tries to put the Gandhian attitude in proper perspective. She is against the hero-worship that was accorded to Gandhiji in this country and she wants people to have a questing attitude towards the Gandhian ideals. She said to Jasbir Jain, “It was unfortunate the way that a whole part as it were, a whole movement sold its judgement to one leader. However great he might be, the greatest thing we possess is our own judgement and our own minds.”4 These words of Ms. Sahgal remind the readers of The Buddha’s famous teaching, “*Be a lamp unto yourself.*”

Nayantara Sahgal is for a balanced attitude towards life. Material prosperity is desirable, but without the spiritual well-being of man it is meaningless. Ms. Sahgal is against the ascetic way of life. The world, with all things in it, is created by God and man is regarded as the crown and roof of its creation. This world is for man to be enjoyed, but as the Isopanishad says, in a spirit of sacrifice. According to this very Upanishad, those who are devoted to acquiring knowledge connected with the world only go to a dark world after death, but those who are given to worshipping only the knowledge leading to God go to even a darker world after death. It is for man to make a distinction between
these two kinds of knowledge and only then by crossing the ocean of
death through the former, he will achieve immortality through the
latter. The same rule applies to material prosperity and spiritual
richness. Ms. Sahgal knows full well the dangers of excessive
obsession with material things. Excessive materialism deadens man’s
soul and makes him incapable of responding to the beauty of the
world. This was what Wordsworth, the greatest English poet of Nature,
pointed out in his famous sonnet, *The World Is Too Much With Us*. In
other words, our material prosperity devoid of spiritual contents tends
to make us inhuman and keeps us far, far away from fulfilment. Man
ought to think of, try to get and enjoy material comforts. He has every
right to do so. Ms. Sahgal nowhere in her fiction opposes this
tendency of man. She is, indeed, against that ideal which upholds self-
immolation for achieving happiness in life. But she is equally against
man’s tendency of being extremely concerned with his material well-
being that makes him indifferent to the beauty that lies around him.
During her travels abroad, Ms. Sahgal found that people in the west
were very prosperous, but their life had become just mechanical.
When a man acts like a machine, he does not get involved in what he
does and so mechanical performance fulfils only physical need but not
the emotional one. Neil Berensen in *This Time Of Morning* speaks of
the evil consequences of prosperity to Rashmi thus:

> We have every material things we want, And
> sometimes it has dire effects. Like internal
> hemorrhage, when you don’t know what has
> hit you, but you’re dying.  

5
That prosperity may result in the drying up of emotions is proved by the case of Simrit, the heroine of the novel, *The Day In Shadow*. Simrit finds that her husband, her son and daughter are nor emotionally attached to her. Their materialistic attitude towards life is to a great extent responsible for this. Prosperity, which causes obsession with power and possession, makes Som ‘a man without pity or concern, or even real responsibility’ as is proved by the harsh terms of divorce he imposes on his wife, Simrit. As a result of his harshness, Simrit feels like an over-loaded donkey whose burden attracts no notice and draws forth no pity for “loads are for donkeys.” Before divorce his relationship with her showed no trace of involvement with her and had his attitude reciprocated by her. Her son, Brij, is so fascinated by the money-world that he does not like to think beyond it and does not care for his mother who is a victim of his father’s cruelty. Her daughter, too, is devoid of all emotions and does not feel attached to her. She is always lost in the dream-world of affluence which his imagination has shaped after her seeing rich advertisements in magazines. The world is too much with them – a fact that has deadened their souls. Otherwise her son wouldn’t have thought of ignoring his mother to keep intact his equation with his father, the perpetrator of Simrit’s misery. Thus, Ms. Sahgal voices her dissent against excessive materialism.

Nayantara Sahgal regards nationalism as one of the highest ideals. She wants all her fellow citizens to cherish it. They should feel that they owe their supreme loyalty to their country and should work whole-heartedly to make their country progress in right direction. A
true nationalist is characterized by his devotion to his country. He will always resent the distortion of his country’s history and will see that it is set right. In Lesser Breeds, Nurullah is appointed by Bhai to supervise his daughter, Shan’s education. He corrects much of what she has been taught about India’s history. We can see how the English teachers did their worst to Anglicize their Indian pupils. When he tells Shan that they will talk about Palashi, she corrects him saying crossly, “Plassey, you can’t even pronounce it. It was a famous battle and Clive was its hero.” But true to his nationalistic impulse, Nurullah continues to pronounce the word as Palashi. The following dialogue between Nurullah and Shan brings out the former’s (and the author's) nationalistic attitude toward the history of India as well as the denunciation of the tendency of the British rulers to distort it:

That’s the story that got around, dost, but it was no battle, it was a plot. And the place was Palashi where Angrez and Hindustani budmashes – each no better than the other when it came to sharp practice and crooked business – got together and outwitted the Nawab of Bengal.’

‘There was fighting’, she objected, ‘and the English side won and the Indian side lost’.

‘But not because Indians’ can’t fight’, he said sternly, ‘Clive had two thousand Indian soldiers fighting on his side and only eight hundred goras. As far as fighting goes it’s been
done for them by Indians up and down this land and all over the world. Indians won India for the Angrez.’

‘Sister Clara says Plassey was a battle and Clive was its hero’, the obstinate girl persisted.

‘Sister Clara is very sincere’, said Nurullah who had met and liked the rosy-cheeked woman who looked happy to be a nun, ‘do not blame her. There’s conspiracy to keep history books in darkness about what really happened. Here’s how it went. First they came as traders to trade, then they got greedy and broke the trading rules, then they armed themselves to protect their ill-begotten profits, then they hired soldiers and built fortresses to defend the loot. Then they grabbed land and called it theirs. The story of empire, dost. It goes from Company to Cantt to Crown.\(^8\)

These words of Nurullah show that he is a staunch nationalist and represents the author in his nationalistic view of Indian history. Through her novels Ms. Sahgal projects the creed of nationalism with a view of inspiring her readers to follow it. When Gandhiji observed that politics without religion would be like the coils of a snake round his throat, he expected politicians to see their ultimate good in doing good to others. After all, it has been well said that there is no religion
like benevolence. Nayantara Sahgal gives vent to the desirability of nationalism by comparing the attitudes of various characters towards politics. For example, in *This Time Of Morning* the attitude of Kailas Vrind towards politics is quite different from that of Kalyan Sinha, Somnath and Dhiraj. Kailas Vrind equates politics with service whereas for the latter politics is a means of achieving material prosperity and easy fame. A nation progresses by leaps and bounds when honest politicians dedicated to the welfare of people take part in the game of politics. When politics becomes a sport for dirty politicians, it results in the ruin of the nation. As Kailas Vrind puts it, “any game was a dirty game when dirty people played in it.” Hence, it is politicians like Kailas Vrind who can make a significant contribution to the growth of their nation. Ms. Sahgal is proud of writing from a nationalistic point of view. She says:

I am neither pro-communist nor anti-communist. I have never written from any specific ideological viewpoint. If I have, I have a nationalistic viewpoint. My only ideology is that I do not believe in kings and queens and political dynasties. In *A Situation In New Delhi*, I did show certain admiration for communism. The Youngman Rishad became a Naxalite. It was a very remarkable phenomenon at that time and the youth were captured by it, especially the sons of upper middle class people. It admired that idealism but deplored
violence. Depiction of self-destructive violence might have aroused the comment of my being anti-communist. Of course, the critics very often view things very differently from the way one wrote it. 10

In a sense, the novels of Nayantara Sahgal may be described as the author’s lamentation over the loss of humanistic values in politics and depletion of the spirit of nationalism in the post-Independence era in the country. When the country achieved freedom from the British rule on August 15, 1947, it was a time for every Indian to be happy. But disillusion followed soon after. According to Manmohan Bhatnagar, in the novels of Ms. Sahgal, “the long drawn-out fight for freedom, the high hopes at the attainment of Independence, the mushrooming of opportunists and ideologues soon after, the rise of fissiparous forces tearing at the national fabric, the rise of pseudo-Radicalism, apathy, unconcern and rank self-seeking, pushing the nation to a point of extremity; the edifice of egalitarian democracy reeling under the unscrupulous Emergency-regime – the tortuous course taken by the country in recent years comes alive in essentially human terms.”11 The very themes of her novels speak of her nationalistic outlook.

Nayantara Sahgal’s views on Hinduism as reflected in her novels throw a lot of light on her philosophy of life. The passivity inherent in Hindu religion or resulting from its wrong interpretation appals her. She is seen reflecting on this subject time and again in her novels. It is a fact well-known that unlike Christianity and Islam, Hindu religion is not an organized religion. Hence it lacks in a clear cut definition of its
nature. The ambiguity of Hinduism baffles even its adherents. No wonder that Nayantara Sahgal finds the concept of Hinduism perplexing and expresses her perplexity in the following words:

Ask a Hindu what Hinduism means and if he can tell you at all, his reply will be different from the next Hindu’s. Is Hinduism, in term of daily life, merely a vast framework of obedience, or does it encourage or equip us to make the choices and value judgements that human beings have to make nearly everyday of their lives and certainly in times of crisis. 12

There is a controversy as to whether Hinduism advocates sensuality or asceticism, a free play of senses or self-immolation. If Hinduism is said to advocate sensuality, the ascetics will no longer remain worthy of our veneration; if self-immolation, how can a Hindu justify the existence of the temples of Khajuraho or of The Sun Temple of Konark where one comes across the engravings depicting sex-acts. In *A Time To Be Happy*, McIvor points out to the narrator that Hindus are pre-occupied with giving up things. He is critical of Hindu’s excessive leaning towards asceticism. To this the narrator makes a significant reply – a reply in which we seem to hear the voice of the novelist herself:

We are and we aren’t .... That is one of the paradoxes you will find in India, probably the basic paradox. And when you examine it, it isn’t really a paradox at all. I have always
believed there are two opposite tendencies that create the pattern of Indian life: a forthright sensuality existing side by side with a stark and stoic renunciation. They seem poles apart, but they are really two sides of same coin. At heart the sensualist is as Indian as the ascetic. The difference between the two is usually a matter of time. It is ingrained in us from an early age that there is a time for everything and everything is right in its own time. Even if the sensual temperament does not gradually lean toward asceticism, it will, at any rate, always regard the ascetic as the ideal of a fulfilled old age.  

McIvor finds fault with the theory of Karma (action), which can be regarded as the corner stone of Hinduism. He says, “...you people believe in Karma. Isn’t that a fatalistic approach to life? Doesn’t it mean a complete acceptance of your condition? That’s exactly the reverse of getting the most out of life.” To the narrator this view of Hinduism also sounds erroneous and he attempts to correct it with the following words –

You are wrong....Karma merely means living your life and doing your duty to the best of your ability in whichever capacity you happen to have been born in. True, your present condition is the result of your past life and
actions, but then it is equally true that what you do in this life will create conditions for your next one. In other words, it rests wholly with you to better your status. There was never a more challenging philosophy. The difference between your belief and mine is that you see life in terms of time, a limited space allotted to every man in which he must accomplish all he can before he dies. We see it in terms of eternity, with infinite time ahead for every human being to make a better creature of himself. 15

Ms. Sahgal herself believes in the theory of Karma. She looks at Hinduism from different angles. The idea of restraints which is held in high esteem in Hinduism comes in for criticism again in The Day In Shadow. Raj, a Christian, does not see any sense in the Hindu approach for suppression of feelings. He regards this tendency as something extremely harmful. Commenting on Simrit’s avidity about restraint and her view that it works out very well in general living and has done so for thousands of years, he says –

Has it ? Somehow I don’t think it has brought this country many dividends, this Hindu avidity for restraint. It’s compromise with everything outside the sanctum and sheer rigidity within.16
After telling Simrit that ‘it’s time to break out and be avid, be something’, he continues –

What is absent from This Hindu Civilization of yours is avidity, the positive desire for something positive. You have to unearth that, and if your principles don’t help you to, find some that do. Restraint is a fine thing but at this particular juncture in our history when we have to act, and be responsible for our actions, I think passion and deeds would serve us better.17

In Rich Like Us we have a clear-eyed self-critical approach to Hindu religion in these words of Sonali: “....So Hinduism remains, as uplifting as salvation, as destructive as slavery, and we must reckon with it.”18 These words of Sonali point to the strength as well as weakness of the Hindu way of life.

Nayantara Sahgal wants Hindus to have a new and fresh look at their ancient religion and infuse it with new vigour so that it may give them enough strength to protest against all kinds of injustice. Books like the Gita can inspire Indians to come out of their shells of passivity and face life bravely. It sounds strange that a great poet like T.S. Eliot has no difficulty in picking up the lesson of the Gita: “Not farewell/But fare forward, Voyagers”, but Hindus fail to comprehend the message of this great philosophical poem though they never feel tired of boasting of its greatness. Most of the Hindus are like Simrit who need a goading from persons like Raj and Ram Krishan to cast off
their torpor and lead an active life. In the following words Nayantara Sahgal raises her voice against the passivity of Hinduism which gives her a great anguish:

As a novelist I am concerned with the creation of character, and it became apparent to me that I was up against a psychological block in my Hindu protagonists when it came to action. A Muslim, a Christian or a Sikh usually had to be the dynamic one, the doer and actor. In The Day In Shadow’, the problem of passivity becomes intensely concentrated in the person of one woman. Simrit becomes almost paralyzed with her passivity. She is reduced to sitting and suffering instead of fighting the wrong in the shape of the unfair legal settlement that her husband has inflicted on her at the time of their divorce. This spectacle exasperates her Christian friend (Raj) and makes him wonder: Did Hindus have any feelings, that were personal and private, unconnected with institutions like the family, caste and the unbeaten track of these 2000 years and more? In other words, when, if ever, does a Hindu get up and fight,…

Nayantara Sahgal is conscious of the strengths as well as weaknesses of Hinduism. She has pointed out its weaknesses, but
these weaknesses have not made her an atheist. It is the inadequacies of Hinduism to which she draws our attention and wants its adherents to turn their back upon them. According to Manmohan Bhatnagar, “However scathing Ms. Sahgal might be in her expose of the glaring inadequacies of Hinduism, as it is taken to be, she is in no way atheistic or irrational in her treatment of religion. A fettering faith she exposes only to plead for the desperate need for an enlightening faith.”20 In a letter to him Ms. Sahgal Said:

I have... seen it (Hinduism) as fettering as far as emotional and spiritual and intellectual growth are concerned, but only because people had misinterpreted it and its messages. I think we still have to define what Hinduism means, what its scope and limits are, and only then will we draw strength from it the way that a Christian, Muslim or Sikh draws strength from his religious heritage. 21

Belief in God and in the theory of Karma are integral features of Ms. Sahgal’s philosophy of life. So ingrained is her faith in God that inspite of being brought up in an atmosphere charged with agnosticism she failed to be a non-believer. Similarly, the theory of Karma (action), according to which one reaps what one sows, makes a special appeal to her. On being asked whether she thinks people are what they are because they are made like that or they can be as they wish to be, she said,
I must confess that I am a believer. I have failed in my long struggle to become an atheist. It is a matter of temperament. You don’t grow into a believer. Partly, it is a matter of experiences in your life. But largely, it is a matter of temperament. I come from a westernized and Anglicized family of agnostics. At one time it was the hall-mark of being civilized and enlightened. My grand-father was an avant-garde when he declared him self an agnostic. In spite of such influences I am a believer. There is some kind of outer order at work that needs a lot of help from us. No question of sitting like a lump or like a pawn on the chess board. Obviously each one is in charge of his/her destiny. All religions believe in the theory of ‘Karma’ i.e. “as you sow, so shall you reap.” So there has to be a balance between the order about us and the order we create. 22

Ms. Sahgal has been a champion of freedom all her life. She abhors slavery in any form. Freedom is a wide-ranging term for her. She is concerned not only with political freedom but freedom in domestic sphere also. She casts her eyes all round her and finds that there is nothing living on earth which is not infused with a desire for freedom. She wants her countrymen to respect and defend the
freedom of the country which was won after a long drawn battle. Like her great maternal uncle Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, she believes that ‘eternal vigilance is the price of liberty’. She has no respect for the intellectuals of the country if they keep mum on or uphold suppression of freedom. This is how her idea about the irresistible yearning for freedom finds expression in strong terms in *This Time Of Morning*.

There is a yearning for freedom in everything that lives. The way the plants grow towards the sun. No power on earth can prevent that happening. And in people, since time began, sooner or later, in one way or another, the yearning bursts out and spills over. 23

She wants people to have consideration for the thoughts and feelings of others and she decries the tendency of some people to make others conform to their views. Each and every member of the society must be free to form and give vent to his views fearlessly. The following words from *This Time Of Morning* clearly express the kind of attitude the novelist expects to adopt towards freedom:

> Freedom is just an isolated achievement for us. It has not become a habit of mind or a way of life. We are still bound by meaningless doctrines and we show no mercy to those who don’t conform. 24

The influence of Mahatma Gandhi on Nayantara Sahgal led her to give the greatest importance to the individual in her thinking. Like
Gandhiji, she thinks that India cannot make a real progress without working for the well-being of the individual. It is her concern for the growth and development of the individual that permeates all her novels. It is her firm belief that “no human problems can be understood or solved unless human beings regard one another as equals.” According to Manmohan Bhatnagar, “For Nayantara Sahgal state is an institution built up for the garnering of individual energies and then so canalizing them as to obtain the best results with regard to the welfare and upliftment of the individual him- self and, in the final analysis, the social setup he constitutes with other individuals.”

Like Gandhiji, Ms. Sahgal believes in the growth of the humblest constituent of the state. In this respect, she shares Gandhiji’s ideal of Sarvodaya (the growth of each and every member of the society). For her the individual is the basis of a political system. Her concern for the welfare of the individual finds a clear and forceful expression in the following words of Kailas Vrind addressed to Rakesh –

“Government will begin when this man, and that man and that”, he pointed to two tattered pilgrims washing in the river and a beggar covered with sores who squatted half-naked staring glassily at the passers by, “arouse some concern and are given a chance to live like human beings.”

The enlightened reader of Ms. Sahgal’s novels fully shares her concern for the growth of the individual. She believes that, “the central consideration to any problem was the man who faced it.” The goal
Gandhiji had set for the state was to “wipe every tear from every eye.” As was the case with Gandhiji, the individual is at the centre of Ms Sahgal’s thinking. She knows full well that the neglect of the individual will never result in any meaningful progress of the country. Ideologies are, after all, made for the individual, not the individual for them. According to Manmohan Bhatnagar; “She expose the hollowness of all ideological solutions where individuals are meant to serve the ends of ideology. Gyan’s fiery populism (Storm), Kalyan’s impatience for quick progress (Morning), Sumer’s pseudo-radicalism (Shadow), the professed progressivism of the cabinet intellectuals (Situation), Rishad’s revolutionism (Situation) and the ‘dynamic’ policies of the Madam and her son in Rich – all are unambiguously indicted for these consider individuals to be merely “instruments of a process” (Situation). In each novel, as seen hereabove, Sahgal makes one character or the other her mouthpiece to denounce the unthinking and blind adherence to religion which saps individual endeavour and makes one subscribe to a preconceived notion of uniformity of response and behaviour.”

Nayantara Sahgal upholds morality in life and regards it as sine qua non for the individual’s as well as the nation’s all-round development. But her concept of marital morality is different from the traditional one. As far as women are concerned, it is the physical purity which is regarded as the hall-mark of their moral character. In its absence they are considered morally depraved. Most of Ms. Sahgal’s women do not possess this kind of morality. They suffer from no qualms of conscience in developing physical relationship with
other men in order to have fulfilment which they fail to have while living with their husbands. With their husbands they feel lonely even in their most intimate moments. Manmohan Bhatnagar rightly observes in this connection: “Her (Ms. Sahgal’s) women characters cross repeatedly the conventional barriers of morality in their search for meaning and communication. She exposes the hollowness of all ideological solutions where individuals are made to serve the ends of ideology.... In her search for values she limits her characters to no set formula. She makes them test each value on the altar of their experience and derive their own conclusions.”^30 In her view it is the courage of a woman with which she faces every crisis in her life and comes out of it that constitutes her real virtue. On marital morality she has expressed her views in these words,

Well, talking of morality, I have a very different idea of virtue and a virtuous woman, different from the stereotype virtuous woman in India—self-effacing, self-sacrificing to the extent of becoming a ‘sati’ by immolating herself —culmination of the wish to have no identity after the death of her husband. But women in my novels represent different kinds of virtues. They don’t say ‘stay put’ and suffer. They walk out and find a life for themselves. They take a stand. The new ideal of virtue is ‘courage’.^31

These unconventional views of Ms. Sahgal on marital morality are likely to make one think that she is permissive in her outlook. In
other words, one is likely to come to the conclusion that she has pleaded for greater sexual freedom for women in society. Her keen observation of social changes going on in Indian society leads her to think that it is becoming a permissive society and she supports it whole-heartedly in its present form. Reacting to the mention of the comment of a critic that her writings are permissive in outlook, she said,

Well, I take it as a compliment – even if it is supposed to be criticism. The concept of morality is changing in Indian society. Each generation has to think out its morality for itself. As you say, this criticism is by a man. That denotes the male power-structure and the most ancient power-structure in the world is that of male domination. All power structures are very self-protective – especially if they feel threatened. Take the question of ‘sufferage’. What a threat it was for the father and the husband as the dominant figure in the family. This is not a battle of a man against woman. It is a battle between those who believe in an equal society and those who don’t. Definitely it is becoming a more permissive society and I am all for it.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus we can say that Ms. Sahgal’s concept of marital morality has a humanistic touch. It is beyond conventional definition. The
behaviour of her characters shows that they do not care a fig for conventional morality and seek fulfilment following the principles which they have tested against the touchstone of experience and found them true. As Jasbir Jain points out, “Vishal sees in Saroj innocence and chastity not related to her physical life. And Shah, the timid industrialist, who sets out to please both the political groups (in *The Day In Shadow*) also realizes that a man’s morality “must sometimes be judged by his character and his motive, not always his action.” For Simrit freedom at an individual level comes only when she is able to shed the feeling of guilt which her broken marriage has left her with. She learns to live life for what it is.”

Morality in the field of politics is concerned with integrity. It consists in equating politics with service—selfless service of the society as distinguished from self-service. As a political novelist she emphasizes the quality of honesty in politicians and seems to hint that without it politics will soon degenerate into becoming a refuge of scoundrels. In her fiction there is a galaxy of politicians whose hearts are pregnant with the celestial fire of high ideals. Among those whose conduct is worthy of emulation are: Sohan Bhai, in *A Time To Be Happy*, who, in his love of spinning, humanitarianism, and his zeal for mitigating the sufferings of others, is suggestive of Mahatma Gandhi; the unnamed P.M. in *This Time Of Morning* and Shivraj in *A Situation In New Delhi*, who, in their visionary nature and tirelessly working to realize their high ideals, resemble Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India; Kailas Vrind, the Chief Minister of U.P. in *This Time Of Morning*, for whom politics is a means of
rendering selfless service to the people and who is committed to high ideals in politics and is modelled by the novelist on her learned and noble father, Sitaram Pandit; and Usman, the idealist in *A Situation In New Delhi*, who in his reformist zeal resembles Jaya Prakash Narayan. The novelist suggests that in the hands of politicians like these the present of the country will be prosperous and the future quite safe. Hari Mohan in *This Time Of Morning*, who in the game of power draws no bounds and does not hesitate to use religion for ‘political bargaining and power’ represents those politicians who are responsible for the erosion of values in the political life of the country. Then, there is Madam (Ms. Indira Gandhi, the former Prime Minister of India) in *Rich Like Us*, who, in the name of improving law and order in the country, imposes Emergency and thereby murders democracy in order to perpetuate her family rule in the country. Such politicians exhibit lack of integrity and make a fatal onslaught on the political values which are necessary for the substance of democracy in the country. Such political leaders as are devoid of morality or integrity are not desirable.

Ms. Sahgal’s novels reflect her thinking on education also. She is fully aware of the maladies of the country’s educational system. Education aims at the allround development of a student’s personality and at preparing him to face bravely the challenges the future has in store for him. Ms. Sahgal thinks that these aims cannot be achieved under an educational system which is lop-sided as, instead of caring to develop the analytical faculty of the students, it lays stress on memory and, therefore, encourages cramming up of information and
which allows classes to be too crowded for the teacher to pay personal attention to each and every student. Such an educational system can only spell a dark future for the students. While addressing the Vidya College students on the occasion of the Founder’s Day, Abdul Rehman, the Governor of U.P., is aware of the inadequacies of the education they have received. He wonders whether their education has given them ability to face the future with confidence. He thinks,

What preparation had they received to fit them for the future. Their memories, not their minds, had been trained and they had never been required to express themselves. It was worse than scandal, it was a tragedy, one that would overflow into the homes of this state capital, into the nation and the far future.  

Literacy is generally taken for education in this country. But this is an erroneous view. A distinction must be made between literacy and education. A literate man may or may not be an educated person in a true sense of the term and an illiterate man may pass for an educated person. There was an Emperor in India, who, being illiterate did not know how to sign, but nobody can say that he was an uneducated ruler. Akbar the Great is meant here. But there are many academic degree holders who do not know how to behave like civilized beings and are easily led by their noses. A really educated man is one who can think for himself and provide leadership to the society. As one finds in the Rigveda, “The learned guide the ignorant.” (Chikitvanso achetasam nayanti).
Ms. Sahgal wants the educated classes to come forward and give lead to their countrymen and scatter plenty over their smiling land. When the educated classes fail to oppose injustice and support it instead, they become objects of the novelist’s satire. During the Emergency, as the novelist presents in *Rich Like Us*, when the educated classes were required to rise against it and to have safeguarded freedom by providing alternative leadership, they were content to behave like a tortoise or tried to serve their self-interests by flattering the powers of the time. They did not work with the masses. As Jasbir Jain puts it, “Nayantara observes that this was not the case during the freedom struggle when “the educated were united with the masses under a common inspiration to work for a common welfare and goal.” But this sense of identification had been destroyed because the people in power pursued the “classic communist technique” of instigating class war and dividing the people. Partly the lack of reaction is also due to the fact that they were taken by surprise. But all this does not excuse the failure of the educated to uphold the cause of freedom.”36 We are told by Steward D. McBride how much Ms. Sahgal felt “frustrated with the failure of India’s intelligentsia”37 to resist the Emergency repression in India.

In *A Situation In New Delhi* the novelist raises her voice against the interference in the University affairs. She, thus, expresses her view in support of complete autonomy for universities. Usman, the vice-chancellor of the Delhi University, presents his blueprint for educational reforms to the union cabinet through Devi. But this blueprint is not accepted by the Cabinet. Usman resigns the Vice-
Chancellorship and dedicates himself to the moulding of the youth according to his vision.

Nayantara Sahgal has pondered deeply over the issue of virtue, chastity and honour of women and come out with clear views on it. In a letter to E.N. Mangat Rai, she wrote: “I do not see things clearly in terms of moral or immoral, right or wrong and this may be why I choose compassion and consideration as guides.”

Uma in This Time Of Morning, is not chaste in the conventional sense of the term, for she, finding that her husband cannot satisfy her sexual appetites to her heart’s content, does not hesitate to indulge them somewhere else. From the traditional point of view her attitude is not free from blame. Sex is one of the goals set for man. And Lord Krishna has declared in the Bhagavadgita that he is kama or sexual desire in the human beings, who are not opposed to Dharma or the Law. Extra-marital sexual relationship or pre-marital sexual relationship not ending in marriage cannot be regarded as actions in accordance with the spirit of Dharma. Hence, Uma’s action sounds quite out of tune with the spirit of The Law. But the novelist sympathizes with her. When Ms. Sahgal was asked about her idea behind the creation of the character of Uma, she made the following significant reply:

A woman is not allowed to be a woman in orthodox thinking. She has to be good and good means virtuous in the sense of chaste. Uma was a woman with appetites that her husband couldn’t satisfy, so she indulged them elsewhere. Men do it and there is no
comment. This happened to be a mismatched marriage (and there are many of those) in which the woman was the stronger, more independent character. 40

For Ms. Sahgal the question of chastity in itself is a thing of past. She asks, “What is virtue in a woman? Is it compliance with society’s laws or should it be judged by a larger vision and standard?” 41 One can easily conclude from what has been said about her view of chastity that she wants chastity of a woman to be judged by a vision and a standard larger than than the conventional morality. Then one will not raise one’s eyebrows at the sight of a woman who looks quite unchaste to an upholder of conventional morality.

Man has adopted a dual attitude toward chastity which brings out his hypocrisy. He considers a quality of physical chastity a must for every woman, but not for himself or any other man. Chastity is, indeed, in this way an instrument in the hands of men for torturing women. In A Situation In New Delhi, for example, Narang adopts a dual standard toward chastity. He sees nothing wrong in his habit of ogling at beautiful women, but when his daughter lights a cigarette, he finds this to be a blot on his honour. Inder in Storm In Chandigarh is also a man of double standard as far as chastity is concerned. He tortures his wife continuously for her pre-marital affair without feeling ashamed of his clandestine affair with Mara. Ms. Sahgal’s view of male honour and female virtue finds expression in the following strong terms:
All but a few societies make a ruthless cult of male honour and female virtue. Down the ages the halo of virtue has extracted an awesome range of self-denial in return from the sacrifice of life, as in sati, to the sacrifice of personality, expression and ambition depending on the times and more crucially the culture of home, especially of its males.42

In her novels Nayantara Sahgal recognizes the importance of biological urge. Though her mind is steeped in the Gandhian values of truth, non-violence and concern for the growth and upliftment of the individuals, she does not share Gandhiji’s enthusiasm for celibacy. It is strange that in India where the Kamasutra, a treatise on sex, was written by a great seer named Vatsyayana, sex is regarded as a taboo. It is not thought honourable to talk about sexual matters openly. Only conjugal love carries the seal of social approval. Extra-marital and pre-marital love are frowned upon though indulged, perhaps with pride, on the sly. Ms. Sahgal is fully conscious of the need for physical gratification for leading a healthy life. In Mistaken Identity, it is Willie-May, who, in her conversation with Bhushan, the hero of the novel, seems to echo the view of the novelist on sex:

‘I have to go home.’

‘Leave here ? You’d have to be crazy. Wait a minute, there has to be a woman in this somewhere ?’
'How do you know, Willie-May?' I felt the agony of pressure on an aching muscle. The relief of it, too.

'How do I know? Hey, everybody needs sex. Sex is good for you. We'd go crazy if we didn't get enough of it. 43

In this very novel we hear the comrades pour ridicule on Bhaiji’s pleading in support of the Gandhian vow of celibacy. Talking of the India of Bhaiji’s dreams, they say:

....Citizens will abstain from sex and turn the other cheek. Independence will be the dawn of an era washed clean of drink and lust.

In fact, Bhaiji expounds, man’s reproductive fluid (as he calls it) will be saved up to regenerate his body and brain and, as yogis know, extend his life beyond the normal hundred years it should be by twenty-five-years. He will attain the Vedic life-span. Who these days lives to even a hundred years? Bhaiji pokes his chin challengingly at us.

'Well? Do any of you know a hundred-year-old? There you are then! The precious fluid is being squandered.'

Civilizations have declined and disappeared because they frittered it away. Iyer tells Pillai Independence might come
sooner than we think, since he’s pretty sure
the bureaucrats have not been conserving
their precious fluid. 

In the following passage from Ms. Sahgal’s latest novel, Lesser Breeds, the narrator compares the effect of the sex-act to the effect on mind of Arjun of the Lord’s world-form which outshone thousands of suns. The passage describes also the effect of the sex-act in the form of the soundest sleep:

Under the sheltering, victorious arch the right became a banquet. In one torrential release after another Nurullah knew what had befallen Arjuna on the battlefield when Krishna Bhagwan appeared to him in the light of a million suns with mouths and eyes and faces turning everywhere, innumerable arms and thighs and jaws expanded to contain the universe, a vision to stun a seasoned warrior. At some moonlit hour their conjoined bodies reversed position, not of his volition because he had none, but in obedience to the epoch of change she had initiated. Before he fell into the soundest sleep of all his life his gratitude knew no bounds. He opened his eyes much later to a morning he knew would never come again.

Since sex is important in life, sex-education becomes a must. As has been said earlier, India is country where Vatsyayan, a great seer,
wrote a book on the art of love. He was justified in doing so because in man’s life it is thought that precedes action. In other words, he thinks before he acts. Hence, in order to make sex a means of fulfilment in life, sex-education is not to be taken lightly. This education may be formal or informal. In Lesser Breeds, there is Janey Ann, who imparts secrets of sex-life to Shan. While in America Shan, who has gone there for higher studies, goes to the college library. She finds out there the books she needs for class assignments and disposes of them under her arm-chair. Thereafter she roams the stocks researching western love-rites. Her notings in her note-book throw light on her sex-education. The following passages from the novel are notable in this respect:

In western love some men go for boobs and some for legs or rumps like preferring juicy breast or crispy tender things on their restaurant menus. But Janey Ann says women just go for the men and not for the measurements of their body parts. Men’s organs and body parts don’t have to be tape-measured to make sure they’ve the right size for women to fall into love with them. The way a woman tells if a man is her one and only hers is if he makes her feel like a helpless speck of nothing in his arms.  

Shan learns everything about ‘good night ceremonies’ from Janey Ann. In the note-book she writes:
My mind was in a whirl. I know there is an order of events in the goodnight ceremonies. Janey Ann explained it to me step by step before her abortion, very mathematically with a diagram and a long lead statuette called the Bagpiper, donated to the dorm by a 1910 alumna of Scottish ancestry. (The good night struggle results from keeping the Bagpiper from shooting out of your date’s pants. This must not happen before wedlock. The militant behaviour of The Bagpiper is something I would never have guessed at, there being not a nudging suspicion of it inside trousers). 47

And later, we read in the novel, “Suddenly Otto fell (but more systematically than Janey Ann’s dates) into the order of events. He gravely unwrapped Shan from her Conjeevaram sari and deposited it with infinite care in a heap on piano....”48 Thus Shan gets theoretical as well as practical knowledge of sexual matters. One may say that this is true of the permissive society of America. But the fact of Ms. Sahgal’s taking pride in her writings being ‘permissive in outlook’, it is not difficult to infer that she is in favour of sex-education in India.

For Nayantara Sahgal marriage is a sacrament, not a contract. Her women characters believe in the institution of marriage and never lose faith in it. Marriage can be a source of happiness only when women are treated by their husbands on equal terms. But unfortunately in the male-dominated society men take delight in
ruling over women. They believe in and perpetuate through their conduct the Tennysonian principle that men are born to command and women to obey. Ms. Sahgal’s women revolt against this idea. They feel no qualms of conscience in opposing their husbands who are given just to satisfying their male chauvinism. But these women neither lose their faith in the institution of marriage nor hate their men who oppress them. They do not become misanthropes either. After all, it is men other than their oppressive husbands who help them tide over the crisis created in their married life by their egoistic husbands. Rashmi, who with her husband Dalip feels like ‘a moth trapped in cement’, she first gets comfort from Neil Berenson and then, finally, discovers true resort with Rakesh. Simrit finds happiness with Raj and Saroj finds comfort with Vishal Dubey. The ‘ranee’, the mother of Bhushan in Mistaken identity gets rid of her husband by marrying a Muslim. Ms. Sahgal support the Hindu concept of ‘Ardhangini’. According to this concept, wife is the equal half of her husband and so is husband of his wife. Neither of the two is more or less important than the other. They deserve equal respect from each other. If this concept be translated into reality, married life would undoubtedly become a thing of joy for ever. When Ms. Sahgal was asked whether she wanted to portray human quest for happiness or mainly the sufferings of women, she replied,

‘I never ever tried to portray human quest for happiness. I don’t think there is any such thing as happiness. We may come across it sometimes as a result of what we do. What one
can at the most have is a very principled compromise. I don’t try to portray the sufferings of women. I try to portray the sensibility of women. How a woman looks at herself and her problems. I think she should try to understand and realize herself as a human being and not just as an appendage to some male life. The Hindu idea of ‘Ardhangini’ would be the ideal concept. 49

As a result of Gandhiji’s influence on her life, Nayantara Sahgal has firm faith in non-violence as a way of life. Jasbir Jain has pointed out that “in her personal life Nayantara refused to believe that non-violence was a spent force even when she was confronted by the partition of India and its aftermath. Its failure at a critical juncture revealed not its inadequacy but the weakness of human material. When the process of civilization itself had been so slow, it was unrealistic to imagine that ‘this, the approach of love and peace, the final stage of refining process could be arrived at suddenly.” 50 It is a fact wellknown that non-violence, which is deep-rooted in the culture of India, was first used as a unique weapon of resistance by Mahatma Gandhi. The term ‘non-violence’ is negative but it suggests the positive qualities of love and co-operation. Gandhiji used this weapon of resistance against the British rule without the feelings of fear and hatred. Ms. Sahgal believes in the power of non-violence as the only “ultimate deterrent in the world today.” In other words, it is only through the observance of his principle of non-violence that the world,
which is seated on the heap of the most destructive weapons of war invented so far, can be saved from extinction. Ms. Sahgal’s view is akin to the view of an Indian thinker of no less eminence than Dr. Radhakrishnan who says: “What we are called upon to do is to increase the scope, so to say, of non-violence – *Yatnat alpatara bhavet*. By our self-effort we must reduce the scope of force and increase the scope of persuasion. So *ahimsa* is the ideal we have before us.”\(^{51}\)

The principle of non-violence, according to Ms. Sahgal is no less useful in domestic sphere as its observance will certainly lead to the strengthening of a family relationship. If marital relationship is based on love born of mutual understanding and respect for each other, it will definitely lead to fulfilment. Violence may manifest itself in domestic life in the form of the husband’s chauvinism which make him treat his wife merely as a slave, in his torturing her for her pre-marital affair while unashamedly having clandestine affairs with other women, or in the imposition of harsh terms of divorce. The violence in family life can be put to an end only by the observation of non-violence of thought, speech and action. Only when husband and wife treat each other as equal partners and show consideration for the thoughts and feelings of each other, marriage, with these right ingredients, will be a source of happiness. Thus, non-violence is needed not only in national and international affairs but in domestic sphere also.

Thus we can say that Nayantara Sahgal has a very sound philosophy of life. It has the power to infuse in the reader the spirit of nationalism as well as that of internationalism. ‘No man is an island in himself’, said the English Metaphysical poet John Donne and the
thought of ‘Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam’ (the whole world is a family) has been dear to Indians’ hearts since times immemorial. These ideas find an echo in Ms. Sahgal’s advice to the young writers: “I would say ‘stand from fear set free’; connect with the world around you.”

She is an optimist. Pessimism is unknown to her nature. Her writings enable the readers, especially women, to face life with courage and confidence. She can be called a reformer who believes that by following the Gandhian principles with discretion we can better life on earth. She is pained to see the moral values on the decline in public life and wishes they were put on firm footing. She seems to say with Omar Khayyam, a Persian poet:

Ah, Love! could thou and I with fate conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits – and then
Remould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire!

However, one should not think that she writes with the sole purpose of giving vent to her philosophy of life. She is, above all, an artist and knows full well how to translate her vision of life in artistic terms.
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