A Summary of

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‘The Novels of Nayantara Sahgal : A Study in her Political Vision

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By
Shardha Mishra, M.A.

Under the Supervision of
Dr. Shri Krishna
M.A., Ph.D.
Ex- Associate Professor,
Dept. of English
Badri Vishal Degree College, Farrukhabad
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A SUMMARY

Ms Nayantara Sahgal has enriched the corpus of Indian English fiction with her nine excellent novels – A Time To Be Happy, This Time of Morning, Storm In Chandigarh, The Day In Shadow, A Situation In New Delhi, Rich Like Us, Plans For Departure, Mistaken Identity and Lesser Breeds. Born in 1927 of the scholarly father, Ranjit Pandit and the talented and loving mother, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Nayantara Sahgal was brought up in Anand Bhavan which was the centre of the political activities during India’s freedom struggle and where she got an opportunity to see the very history of the nation take shape and to come into contact with the greatest political stalwarts including Mahatma Gandhi. She always found her father encouraging and his comforting words helped to keep her buoyant in the midst of failure. From her mother she inherited aesthetic sense. From her uncle, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, whom she regarded as her third parent, she learnt how to think for herself instead of being a parrot of others thoughts. With his precious advice, Pt. Nehru inspired her to become what she wanted to be, namely, a writer. After this she adopted the career of a writer and devoted herself heart and soul to it. Though she was brought up in the agnostic atmosphere of her home, nothing of that atmosphere prevented her from being a believer in God.
Mahatma Gandhi and Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru exercised the most powerful influence on her. The latter encouraged her independent thinking and strengthened her faith in democratic values whereas from the former she imbibed love of tradition, concern for the individual, preference for a life of action, belief in the purity of ends and means and in truth and non-violence.

Family, school and the world are the places where a writer receives formal as well as informal education. We know that William Shakespeare, the greatest English Poet and dramatist, who according to Ben Jonson knew little Latin and less Greek and was for Matthew Arnold an unschooled genius, walked on earth with his eyes and ears wide open and thus learnt a lot about life and the world from his keen observation of the ways of life. But Shakespeare had got an opportunity also to attend the Grammar School though, as it is said, he was withdrawn from it owing to a decline in his father’s fortunes. So Nayantara Sahgal received her formal education first in a convent and then in Woodstock. But she had to unlearn much of what she learnt at the convent about the history of India from her study of the *High Roads of History*, a book which she later called a blot on the name of history. At the Woodstock, she found the atmosphere quite conducive to the development of her personality. At this school, students were required to take the oath of loyalty to God, the king and the country. The patriot in her refused to take the oath of loyalty to
the king. She succeeded in obtaining the principal’s permission to swear allegiance to God and the country only. After attending the Woodstock School, she went to the U.S.A. for higher education. She passed B.A. examination from Wellesley College there. Being Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru’s niece, she, along with her sister Lekha, was hailed as the unofficial ambassador of India. There she had the privilege of meeting the most prominent men and women of the U.S.A. While studying there, she received one day the news of her dear inspiring father’s death. She was so deeply attached to him that his death made her feel that India without him would not be the same to her as it had been when he was there. When the World War II ended, she returned home.

Besides this formal education, Nayantara Sahgal received education in the school of life. As has been said, her home, the Anand Bhavan at Allahabad, was the centre of political activities during the freedom struggle of the country. There she had an opportunity to see almost all the great freedom fighters of the country. It was here she met Mahatma Gandhi whom she first did not like at all but later let him become a shaping force of her outlook on life and the world. His fearlessness gave her courage to face life and its problems with courage and confidence. The failure of her marriage with Gautam Sahgal and the harsh terms of divorce imposed on her by him (a situation similar to that of Simrit in The Day In Shadow) did not break
her heart. She owed this definitely to the influence of Gandhiji on her. After her divorce from Gautam Sahgal, Ms Sahgal shared a live-in relationship with E.N. Mangat Rai before entering into wedlock with him on her appointment as Ambassador to Italy by the Janta Party Government.

Nayantara Sahgal has not joined any political party. This has contributed to the element of impartiality in her thinking. But this impartiality in her case does not mean sitting on the fence. When the freedom of the country became imperilled with the imposition of Emergency on the country by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, she raised her voice against it and supported Jayaprakash Narayan in his campaign against the dictatorial forces.

Ms Sahgal has won world-wide acclaim for her novels. She has been honoured with many awards including the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. Hers is an active life. It would be better to say that she combines contemplation with action in her life. During the 1980s she held the office of Vice-President of People’s Union of Civil Liberties, an organization founded by Loknayak Jayprakash Narayan. She has had the privilege of being a fellow of the W.W. International Centre for scholars, Washington, D.C. and of National Humanities Centre Carolina, U.S.A. She has had also the privilege of being elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of chairing Eurasia Jury
of Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. She has to her credit many an academic honour also.

It is as a political novelist that Nayantara Sahgal has made a significant contribution to the development of the Indian English novel. She is credited for continuing the tradition of the political novel set by Benjamin Disraeli, a great Prime Minister of England. It is the presentation of the political scenario in human terms that forms a very significant feature of Nayantara Sahgal’s novels. We find, indeed, an umbilical link between the political and personal worlds in her novels. Many of the characters she has created in her novels are modelled on the real people she has known and seen at work. They move about in both the worlds and serve as an important link between the two. The issues she raises in these novels are dealt with impartially. For example, the shortcomings of Hindu religion come up for discussion time and again in her novels. She lets an outsider like McIvor in *A Time To Be Happy* describe Hinduism as a fatalistic creed that saps Hindus’ capacity for action. He bases his argument on the Hindu theory of Karma (action) which he holds responsible for uncomplaining passivity. But the narrator in this novel is given an opportunity to freely express his views on the other side of the coin. If, according to the theory of Karma, the deeds done in the previous life result in prosperity or adversity in the present life, it also becomes a challenge, for it lies in the power of man to shape his future through
his deeds. The author herself believes in the theory of Karma but her belief in this respect does not prevent her from examining Hinduism critically. It is through Ram Krishan in *The Day In Shadow* that she presents a balanced view of religion.

A political novelist projects a certain political ideology through his works. Gandhiji is to Nayantara Sahgal what St. Aquinas was to the Italian poet Dante. Gandhiji provides a sound base for her thinking. But her being under the influence of Gandhiji does not mean that she accepts Gandhiji’s philosophy in toto. Hers is an eclectic attitude towards Gandhism. She accepts his ideals of truth and non-violence, of the employing of good means to achieve good ends and of the concern for the individual. But this does not lead her into making her characters mere abstract ideologues. They are, to the contrary, living beings of flesh and blood. In this way the political ideals acquire a life of their own and their presentation gets imbued with living interest. These characters are not mere types. They are endowed with individual characteristics also. It is, thus, through Sohan Lal, Sanad, Kailas Vrind, Raj, Usman, Rishad and Sonali that the constructive ideologies are presented in human terms. Her characters are neither all virtues nor all vices. They are actually, like most of us, blends of virtues and vices. This makes them psychologically true and convincing. There is Kalyan Sinha in *This Time of Morning*, who is a highly attractive character. He shows concern for the exploited, but
does not hesitate to take recourse to exploitation to serve his own ends. He believes in quick progress. His dynamism lends an irresistible charm to his character. Harpal Singh in *Storm in Chandigarh* is not a success. He has had the bitter taste of failure. He is an idealist and the realities of the world cause him frustration, which, but for the timely advice and impetus from Vishal Dubey, might have broken his heart. Similarly, in Rishad in *A Situation In New Delhi* we have a combination of terrorist and a humanitarian reformer. In this way, we find that the political scenario in Ms Sahgal’s novels is presented in human terms through the characters, who, like the people of this world, are not wholly virtuous or vicious but mixtures of strengths and weaknesses. She has actually humanized her negative heroes. These negative heroes belong to the world of politics. They are not characterized by the motiveless malignity of an Iago. What they are in public life is the direct outcome of their internal compulsions. Nootan in Independent India becomes a communist just to regain the thrill of student days which he finds missing in the politics of the day and hence finds it boring. Similarly, Kunti Behn’s criticizing women for attending to their toilette when rural India cried for help results from her inferiority complex bred in her by her marriage being unconsummated on account of her Gandhian husband. Similarly, in *This Time Of Morning*, Kalyan Sinha’s hunger for identity becomes comprehensible when we take into consideration
the fact of his being brought up as an adopted child without any visible marks of identity. So is comprehensible his abhorrence of the doctrine of non-violence which was a consequence of his being spared corporeal punishment and allowed to go scot-free when he was once caught stealing. This also explains the cruelty of his nature.

Nayantara Sahgal’s novels bring out not only her art of characterization but also her skill in telling her stories in such a way that while reading them, the reader’s attention does not flag and through them he is able to comprehend the novelist’s vision, her outlook on life and the world. She employs the narrative techniques of parallelism and contrast to tell her stories. In her novels, she paints life on a large as well as a small canvas. The action of her first novel, *A Time To Be Happy* takes place in Sharanpur (the city of shelter) whereas the canvas of her latest novel, *Lesser Breeds* is spread over India and the U.S.A. There are two worlds in her novels – the personal and the political world, and she successfully integrates these two worlds in her stories. It is her wide concept of politics that enables her to achieve this integration. Politics, for her, is not just the game of power played by the politicians in the national capital or in the capitals of states. It extends to the use of power in family life also – in the use of power by the husband over his wife in one form or the other. Thus, the political and the personal world merge into each other in her novels. The conduct of men in the family dictated by
chauvinism and possessiveness is as detrimental to the happiness of married life as the conduct of politicians devoid of all moral values to the meaningful progress of the country.

Characterization is considered a very vital part of a novel. Characters in a novel are creations of its author and though they are life-like, they are not the same as the people we encounter in our daily life. The people who inhabit the world of a novel reveal far more about their inner life to the reader than do our neighbours, friends and relatives to us. It is through his characters that the novelist conveys his vision of life and the world. The reader lives with these characters. He shares their experiences and learns from their behaviour the secrets of conduct successful or otherwise. These characters are beings of flesh and blood. They are far from being mere abstracted ideologues. Though she is a Gandhian in her belief in non-violence and concern for the individual, she gives her characters freedom to think for themselves. This enables her to look at things from different angles and lets the readers form their own views. This tendency makes her characters psychologically true also. Their thoughts, words and actions are the products of the environment in which they have been brought up and move about. None of her characters are absolutely virtuous or vicious. They are, like most of us, blends of virtues and vices.
Nayantara Sahgal tells her stories in a language quite simple and in a style quite clear. Her language is simple, no doubt, but not unadorned. She skilfully uses such figures of speech as simile and metaphor that not only add poetic charm to her language but effectively present an aspect of a character or a situation. Thus, the description of Rashmi in *This Time Of Morning* as ‘a moth trapped in cement’ brings out very powerfully the agony she feels because of her husband’s callousness and her restlessness to get out of her miserable plight. Thus, the misery of unsuccessful marriage in a woman’s life is embodied in this image. Besides figures of speech, the reader comes across symbols in her novels. These symbols are very powerful and highly suggestive. Among such symbols the club in Sharanpur in *A Time To Be Happy* easily comes to the reader’s mind. The change in its character becomes symbolical of the change in the situation of the country. Its membership being confined to the white men represents the country under the British rule whereas its doors being thrown open to Indians becomes emblematic of the country which has achieved freedom from the foreign yoke. The marriage of Sanad with Kusum, which is also symbolical of the wedding of India with Independence, is solemnized in this club, which was once closed to Indians but now symbolizes the free spirit of India. Such meaningful symbols enrich the style of the novelist.
The issues Ms Sahgal has raised in her novels are very important and it is this fact that lends permanent significance to the themes treated in them. Jasbir Jain says, “Nayantara Sahgal’s novels of mid-eighties are in depth scanning of India and its contradictions, as she explores the morality of a society that would push a woman to her death as ‘sati’ and finds a similar brutality in the ethical compromises which men make in search of power in Rich Like Us. But in Sahgal’s works all along these has been a strong element of hope, of the possibility of a fairy tale world coming true as Bhushan in The Mistaken Identity lives in a prison cell with other prisoners representing different ideologies, religions and regions and where dreams are meant to be pursued, where a ‘ranee’ can elope with a Muslim and the prince can marry the daughter of his mother’s lover, where flowers can be grown even if water is to be ferried from a great distance.” Here Jasbir Jain has dwelt on the optimistic note of her novels and her raising her voice against the ethical compromises in public life. Let us see how far her criticism of ethical derelictions and her concern for human values in her novels make them relevant to the present times.

Nayantara Sahgal’s first novel, A Time To Be Happy has for its theme the achievement of the freedom of the country from the British rule which gives people an opportunity to be jubilant. In her next novel, This Time of Morning she shows the beginning of the
degeneration of moral values in politics. In this novel we meet Kalyan Sinha, Hari Mohan and Dhiraj, who are given to playing with the sentiments of the people for their political benefits. They have created separating values, policies and goals. But they are neutralized by the strength of humanity. We hear the voice of the novelist in Prakash Shukla’s exhortation to Kailas Vrind: “The framework of democracy we have today is from the British, but humanity we learned from the Mahatma.” Kailas Vrind’s view that the individual progress ought to be regarded as a unit of measurement for the progress of the country is fully relevant at present.

In her novels Ms Sahgal glorifies the past when politicians held up moral principles and were sincere in discharging their duties to the nation, putting her above their selves. But she bemoans the present which is characterized by the erosion of moral values in public as well as in personal life. In the novel, *The Day In Shadow*, Sardar Sahib and Sumer Singh represent the glorious past and the ignoble present respectively. Sumer Singh is the Minister of state for Petroleum, but instead of discharging his duties towards the nation, he thinks only of grabbing the Foreign Ministry. He accepts the soviet offer of help for exploration of oil in the Jammu region at the risk of national security instead of the neutral Canadian offer for which Sardar Sahib, with over 20 years’ experience as the Petroleum Minister, has advised. In order to get support of the Independent Members of Parliament for the
deal, he takes recourse to greasing their palms without feeling any qualms of conscience. In this way, he represents corruption in the political sphere which, as the novelist says, is ‘the result of erosion of values in every walk of life.’ We know that in the post-Nehruvian era, corruption became an indispensable feature of Indian politics. P.V. Narsimha Rao, the Ex-Prime Minister of India, was accused of bribing the members of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha to save his government. But Ms Sahgal has not shut her eyes from the presence of good people like Sahib Singh and Raj who hold out hope for the victory of values over the rampant corruption.

Rich Like Us reflects the nefarious nexus between politicians and bureaucrats – a reality which continues to characterize the political scenario of the country. Those bureaucrats who dance to the tune of the politicians are benefited in many ways by the latter. Sometimes they get part of the kicks received by the politicians for some illegitimate deal and sometimes they get promotion out of turn. In this novel Sonali and Ravi Kachru are bureaucrats of different hues. Ravi Kachru is one of those bureaucrats who never feel ashamed of cringing before politicians for personal gains. On the other hand, bureaucrats like Sonali follow the dictates of their conscience and refuse to comply with the wishes of corrupt politicians and as a result of this are punished with demotion or disfavours. Dev, who is dissatisfied with the slow progress being made by his father, decides
to become rich overnight. He establishes links with politicians to start a soft drink company called Happyola in collaboration with foreign concern. Mr. Neuman is invited by him to promote the foreign collaboration. Mr Neuman knows the weakness of the Petroleum Minister and so succeeds in greasing his palm. The Minister agrees to get the proposal of the foreign collaboration confirmed though it is against the policy of the government. When Sonali refuses to confirm the proposal, she is replaced by Ravi Kachru as a Joint secretary in the Ministry of Industry. Ravi Kachru immediately confirms the foreign collaboration as desired by the Minister who has accepted the kicks in advance. Sonali, who believes in discharging her duty to the government sincerely and does so, suffers whereas Ravi Kachru, who is crafty, prospers.

The above mentioned situation of the novel proves the truth of the saying that fact is stranger than fiction when we compare it with real situations involving corruption. In India we have recently had scams like Commonwealth Games and 2-G Spectrum scams. These scams are extra-ordinary in proportions. Suresh Kalmadi and A. Raja, prominent politicians have been accused of having made money to the tune of hundreds of crores in these scams. And so have their secretaries who did not think before leaping to their tunes. Suresh Kalmadi and A. Raja, with their associates, are in jail and facing trial. Thus, by highlighting the corrupt practices involved in the establishing
of the Happyola Company by Dev, the novelist has not only dwelt on the corruption rampant in India during the Emergency, but anticipates also the huge proportion it was going to assume in the country. We can draw a parallel between the Happyola and 2-G Spectrum. The difference is that before the Bofors scam, scams did not come to light in the country. A Raja is like the Petroleum Minister in the novel, who gets a tip in advance for getting the foreign collaboration confirmed and Neera Radia, who works to promote the interests of the corporate world, is like Mr. Neuman who works for Dev.

By highlighting the degeneration of moral values in public life, she has suggested that only by stemming the tide of corruption, we can set the country on to the path of true progress – the progress which will not be for a few but for each and every individual, to which they will feel they have made some contribution according to their capacity. It was because of the corruption infecting every sphere of life that the veteran social activist Anna Hazare went on fast-unto-death a few days ago to get the Jan Lokpal Vidheyak (The People’s Ombudsman Bill) drafted and passed in Parliament in place of the Lokpal Vidheyak which has been waiting for passage in parliament for forty two years. He was supported in his campaign against corruption by such luminaries as Kejariwal, Swami Agnivesh, Shanti Bhushan, Prashant Bhushan, Kiran Bedi and Medha Patkar. Many people fasted
in his support all over the country. The whole country seemed to raise its voice against corruption. Anna Hazare broke his fast after four days on the central government’s agreeing to frame the Jan Lokpal Bill jointly with the members of the Civil Society and getting it passed in the Monsoon Session of the Parliament. In this context, Ms Sahgal’s voice in her novels against the erosion and degeneration of values in public life becomes very significant.

The themes of Nayantara Sahgal’s novels are quite relevant to the present age. They are worthwhile. They have received artistic treatment at her hands and give vent to her concern for the meaningful progress of the country. She has deeply thought over freedom, democracy and its values, religion, dignity of the individual, emancipation of women, marriage and divorce, order and disorders purity of ends and means, truth, non-violence, etc. She has given the fruit of her thinking in the form of her novels. None of the themes treated by her in her novels can be said to be of transitory nature. These themes make the reader think and find out the way in a crisis.

Nayantara Sahgal’s outlook on life and the world as expressed in her novels is highly inspiring. Hers is democratic temperament which makes her believe in persuasion, not in coercion. She believes in the freedom of the individual and fearlessly raises her voice against those who try to suppress it. During the Emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi on the country, which was regarded as an onslaught on
democracy, Nayantara Sahgal, ignoring her family ties with her cousin, Mrs Gandhi, sided with Jayprakash Narayan who led the masses against the dictatorship symbolized by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. She has artistically suggested that the political revolution led by Jayprakash Narayan was the second war of Independence, the first being waged under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. She does this by quoting in her novel, *Rich Like Us* the well-known verse of the Hindi poet Ramdhari Singh ‘Dinkar’, which was widely used in the fight against the British rule. ‘The verse is : Sinhasana Khali Karo Ki Janta ati hai’ (vacate the throne for the masses are coming). This verse was equally widely used by the people in their campaign against Mrs Indira Gandhi under the leadership of Jayprakash Narayan, which resulted in the former’s ouster from power. True freedom demands equal treatment of a human being by another. If we continue to distinguish our fellow-beings on the basis of caste, creed and sex, freedom will remain unrealized in our lives. It is in this context of freedom based on the consideration for the feelings and thoughts of others that she regards man’s chauvinistic and possessive instincts as endangering the freedom of women and as something keeping them from fulfilment in life. If one wheel of a chariot does not move freely, what use will be the free movement of its other wheel for it ? Hence freedom means not only political freedom, but social and familial freedom also.
Nayantara Sahgal has clear views on education. She has expressed her dissatisfaction with the present state of education in the country. She is right in her thinking that the aim of education is to enable a student to make all-round development and to develop his ability to face the challenges life has in store for him. She feels that this aim cannot be achieved under the present system of education which examines a student on the basis of his cramming power instead of his critical and analytical faculty. Abdul Rehman, the Governor of U.P. in This Time Of Morning, hints at the inadequacies of the country’s educational system when he wonders whether the students under the present system of education have acquired ability to face the future with confidence. A Situation in New Delhi gives vent to her view that the Government’s inference in education is not desirable as it is not conducive to its proper growth. She wants universities to be allowed to work autonomously.

Ms Sahgal’s criticism of Hinduism, which defies definition unlike Christianity and Islam, is eye-opening. She rightly bemoans Hindus’ inclination toward passivity when their sacred book, the Bhagvadgita exhorts man to act in a spirit of detachment without caring for the fruit of action. Gandhiji’s active life has been a perennial source of inspiration to her. She wants Hindus to cast off their slough of passivity and to brave the struggle of life with confidence. Her women characters successfully attempt to come out of the misery their
married life has become on account of their husbands’ chauvinistic and possessive instincts. They are, no doubt, helped by men in their efforts to get rid of their oppressive husbands. In this way these women as well as the men who help them come out of their miserable existence finely illustrate Ms Sahgal’s philosophy of action. The philosophy of action is, indeed, the cornerstone of Hinduism. It is the erroneous interpretation of its spirit that has so far tended to make Hindus fatalists. Ms Sahgal believes in the doctrine – ‘As you sow, so shall you reap.’ On the one hand, this doctrine inspires us to do good deeds, on the other, it implies that man’s present condition is the direct outcome of what he has done in his previous life. Hence it teaches him to be content with his lot and he suffers passively. But this doctrine of Karma, as the narrator in A Time To Be Happy says, makes life a challenge also. In other words, it lies in man’s power to mend his present and shape his future. Life is not to be accepted passively but to be taken as a challenge. This is also what the age-old saying of reaping being the result of what one has sown implies. In this way Ms Sahgal’s interpretation of and belief in the theory of Karma is quite relevant.

Ms Sahgal as well as her women characters believes in the institution of marriage. Marriage, according to her, can lead to fulfilment only if the marital relationship is based on equality. She is all for women’s freedom. But she believes that the ideal state of
women’s freedom can be achieved only within the sanctity of home. She does not want the seeking of freedom on the part of women to result in the destruction of the institution of marriage. It is men who force divorce on their wives. Simrit in *The Day In Shadow* is a case in point. It brings out cruelty of men towards their wives. Divorce is common in the West. Ms Sahgal fails to understand why people marry and divorce so blithely and easily in the west. But the cases of divorce are on the increase in India also. Though their husbands treat them cruelly. Ms Sahgal’s women characters do not lose faith in men. It is, after all, men who help them in coming out of the miserable condition created by them by their cruel husbands. But these women do not hate or condemn the perpetrators of their wrongs. This is perhaps because of the influence on their creator of Mahatma Gandhi who believed in and preached the doctrine of ‘hate the sin, not the sinner.’ Hence, when divorce takes place, Ms Sahgal’s women characters accept it with courage and, though it is unconventional, seek fulfilment with other men of their choice. In this way, for Ms Sahgal the virtue of a woman lies not in her physical chastity but in courage. This view of morality is undoubtedly unconventional but not out of tune with the spirit of the modern age. Most of the educated people subscribe to this view now.

The unequal treatment women receive from their husbands is regarded by the novelist as a manifestation of social hypocrisy which
is on increase these days. She is aware of the political pretence also. But it is characteristic of her as a novelist that she reveals these vices with love and compassion. This approach is certainly a healthy one and it has enabled her to keep intact her faith in the institution of marriage. She gives the secret of successful marriage through Usman in *A Situation In New Delhi*, who, after returning to Nadira, tells her that there’s so much uncertainty ahead, she and he must depend on each other and he will depend on her.

Ms Sahgal gives proper regard to the need for satisfaction of sexual urge. A true Gandhian, she, however, does not care a fig for the Gandhian ideal of celibacy. In one of her novels, she holds up this ideal to ridicule. In *Mistaken Identity*, the comrades laugh at Bhaiji’s enthusiasm for celibacy. And Willie-May significantly tells Bhushan that everybody needs sex; it is good for him and people would go crazy if they didn’t have enough of it. In this way the novelist has shown her consciousness of the fact that the satisfaction of the sexual urge is indispensable for leading a healthy life.

When a writer does not subscribe to the doctrine of art for art’s sake but writes with purpose, some or the other message is bound to emerge from his works. In one of her interviews Nayantara Sahgal has expressed her view that literature is concerned with the telling of the story and the social values may just be fall out of literature. But this fallout, though not the main concern of literature, is not without
significance as it serves as a guide to the reader on the path of life. Her attitude towards Gandhism as expressed in her novels inspires us to think for ourselves instead of being blind followers of anybody, however great he may be. We know that it was under the influence of her maternal uncle Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru that she formed the habit of thinking independently, of thoroughly examining the teachings of great men and following them only when, after testing them against the touchstone of reason, she found them relevant. This is seen in her ignoring Gandhiji’s ideas on celibacy, spinning wheel and cow-slaughter and in upholding his high ideals of truth, non-violence, concern for the individual which she finds relevant in the present context.

Through her novels Ms Sahgal exhorts us to combine contemplation with action in life. Contemplation without action is fruitless and action without contemplation is the sign of a mere brute. Hence there is need for their combination in life so that it may acquire some meaning. She is, no doubt, for comforts of life but she warns us against the evils of materialism also. Too much obsession with the world results in the deadening of sensibility and in the loss of significance of human relationships. Simrit’s son Brij and her daughter, who are always lost in the world of affluence, illustrate this point well. As a result of their being given up to the world, they are not
concerned with anything of value or emotional attachment. Simrit feels this. They are not worthy of emulation.

Ms Sahgal is a nationalist at heart. Her treatment of Indian history (before and after Independence) bears witness to it. A study of her novels inspires patriotism. Her presentation of the new breed of self-seeking politicians and their juxtaposition to the old breed of patriotic and unselfish politicians is sufficient to suggest the desirability of following the latter and thus putting the well being of the nation above our petty self-interests.

Freedom is desirable, but not licentiousness. Freedom can be meaningful only when it is enjoyed with a feeling of respect for the thoughts and feelings of others. Without freedom there cannot be full flowering of one’s personality. So freedom is as indispensable for our growth as the air we breathe is for our life. It is the sign of a civilized society that its men as well as its women fully enjoy freedom. In the absence of freedom, marriage becomes just slavery for women. Such a state of life can be averted only if women are in reality granted the status of equality with men. Only then there will be true emancipation of women. Women ought to develop the new virtue of courage and the society must learn to respect it in place of the hackneyed concept of morality consisting in physical chastity. Through her women characters Ms Sahgal teaches women to face life bravely and fearlessly.
without losing their faith in the institution of marriage and sanctity of home.

There is a lot of violence in the world today. There are dictators flourishing on the sweat and tears of their countrymen. When they are opposed, they take recourse to violence to suppress the opposition. The mightier powers come out in support of the rebels and use greater force against the dictators. The only way to come out of the vicious circle lies in the adoption of non-violence as a way of solving various problems at the national as well as international level. She wants violence to be abandoned in both the public and personal spheres. She believes in non-violence as one of the best ways of life and sees in it hope for mankind.

Thus we see that Nayantara Sahgal is a politically conscious novelist. It is in the presentation of the political scenario in human terms in her novels that her creativity is seen at its best and her distinction as a political novelist lies. Assessing Ms Sahgal’s contribution to the Indian novel in English, Jasbir Jain has rightly observed: “Her major contribution is the continuation of the humanistic tradition in the political context and the political novel in its present form. Men may not always be sensitive or aware and may frequently abandon freedom and related values but the need for freedom remains a primary need and cannot be permanently suppressed.” Her novels reflect the political history of India during the
periods she chooses for treatment in her novels. While reading her novels, the reader sees the history of the nation take shape before his mental eye as the novelist saw with her physical eyes. She tells her stories in a language which is simple yet rich and in a style which is plain yet highly suggestive in many a place. Her philosophy of life is quite sound and so very inspiring. It engenders and strengthens the optimistic outlook in the reader. Her novels are delightful as well as enlightening. She is being read and will always be read with an inexhaustible and ever-fresh interest.