CHAPTER-III

Themes of Nayantara Sahgal’s Novels

Themes are the ideas round which the warp and woof of a story is woven. Nayantara Sahgal’s novels are objective correlatives of her well-thought-out ideas presented through human relationships. The aspects of Indian life with which she deals in her novels are important enough to attract and engage an intelligent reader’s attention. They make the themes of her novels quite worthwhile. She has deeply thought over freedom, democracy and its values, dignity of the individual, individuality and freedom of women, marriage and divorce, order versus disorder, the Gandhian Philosophy of life, etc. The fruits of her thinking take the forms of various themes in her novels. Below are discussed these themes which find an artistic expression in her novels and which bear witness to her observation as well as sympathetic understanding of life.

Freedom, especially individual freedom, is Nayantara Sahgal’s major concern in her novels. Freedom is most dear to her heart and she is all for its presentation. She was a witness to the struggle her countrymen waged to achieve freedom from the foreign yoke. Her parents, her maternal grandfather and uncle were freedom fighters for they all recognized the importance and value of freedom. For why else should they have given up comfort and luxury to undergo the pangs of imprisonment with a smile? We know that many leaders were inspired by English poets in their resolve to fight for freedom to the last breath. They must have felt with Wordsworth:
We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals
Hold which Milton held.  

Love of freedom is a sign of the goodness of heart whereas love of licence is indicative of evil nature. In *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton wrote: “None can love freedom heartily, but good men; the rest love not freedom, but licence.” The patriotism of Rudyard Kipling must have fired their zeal for the fight for freedom:

What stands if Freedom fall?
Who dies if England live?  

Most of the freedom fighters of India fought under the leadership of Gandhiji. Many freedom fighters died before they could see their dream of the country’s freedom come true. They bequeathed their fire to their sons at the time of closing their eyes on the world so that the struggle for freedom might continue and India could achieve freedom from the British Rule. Byron’s following lines must have inspired them:

For freedom’s battle once begun
Bequeathed by bleeding father to son
Though baffled oft is ever won.  

President Roosevelt of the U.S.A. spoke of four freedoms as essential ones. He envisioned “a world founded upon four essential freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way... everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want... every where in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear... every
where in the world” But these freedoms would not be complete without what Mahatma Gandhi called “freedom to be free.”

Freedom is the breath of an individual’s being. Hence, no wonder Nayantara Sahgal emphasizes its importance in her novels. In them she describes the hard struggle people put up to achieve freedom and expresses her concern when threat is meted out to it by an authoritarian regime. She deals with numerous threats to freedom in her fiction. She shows violence and narrow regional loyalties posing a threat to freedom in Storm in Chandigarh; in This Time of Morning and The Day in Shadow unscrupulous leadership is shown as meting out threat to freedom; in A Situation in New Delhi political inertia constitutes a threat to the life-giving freedom; and Rich Like Us, which is set in New Delhi one month after the declaration of emergency, holds up to criticism Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s attempt to stifle the spirit of democracy in India by imposing emergency to save and perpetuate her rule.

In A Time To Be Happy, which is Nayantara Sahgal’s first novel, set in the immediate pre and post-independence India, only hints at the threat to freedom which is likely to come from the scramble for power which has begun to divide even those who share the same ideals. There are mentioned also the rising trends of extremism, fundamentalism, obscurantism which were detrimental to the flowering of the newly won freedom. This disappointing feature of the post-independence political scenario in India which is only hinted in her first novel, acquires clarity of note when she portrays in her second novel This Time Of Morning such politicians as do not hesitate
to overthrow all canons of decency and decorum in their unprincipled hunt for power. “Disorder was just round the corner, always and no motley crew of Parliamentarians would succeed in coping with it any more than picket fences would stem a deluge.” There are two types of characters in the novel – men of vision such as Kailas Vrind, Abdul Rehman and Prakash Shukla who are characterized by a higher sense of devotion, dedication and selfless service to the nation and, on the other hand, men like Kalyan Sinha, Hari Mohan and Somnath who, having no principles, are bent on achieving success in the world through means fair or foul. The workings of the characters of the latter group and their success for a while indicates the chaotic character of politics in the post-Independence India. But the atmosphere of the novel is not wholly murky. The Prime Minister’s inviting Kailas Vrind to become the Chief Minister of U.P. and compelling Kalyan to tenders his resignation holds out hope for future.

The Storm in Chandigarh deals with the linguistic re-organization of the states of the Indian union which was the outcome of the success of the populist, parochial, obscurantist forces which were gaining ground in the post-colonial India. These forces always pose a threat to the integration of the nation and thereby jeopardize freedom of the people. Here are two characters – Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab and Harpal Singh, the chief Minister of the newly created state of Haryana. They represent the old and the new generation of politicians respectively. Harpal Singh is a follower of Gandhi and believes in the nobility of mankind and works for the promotion of communal harmony in the country. On the other hand,
Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab upholds and believes in regional loyalties and in the cult of violence. He supported the bifurcation of the state of Punjab because that promised a bright personal future to him – a future that will see him achieve his selfish ends by all means. Harpal Singh had opposed it because he saw in it a threat to national integration and communal harmony. In this way Nayantara Sahgal Shows in this novel that violence and regional loyalties hold out a threat to freedom and the interest of the nation as whole lies in their curbing.

*The Day in Shadow* presents objectively the fissiparous tendencies that raised their heads in Indian politics in the early seventies. Ram Krishan in the novel describes impressively the decline that social norms and human and moral standards suffered in this chaotic period: “Great ideals were in decay, with nothing yet, or for a long while to come to replace them. Ruthlessness could begin to look quite ordinary and ordinary things appeared impossible.” The split in the Congress Party in 1969, which was a turning point in Indian politics, held, according to the author, definite lessons for the country. It became clear that a bold political leader with a resolute mind could acquire far greater power than was necessary for the health of democratic institutions in a country like India where people, being not vigilant enough, were not strong enough to prevent such a happening. Decisions with far-reaching consequences were taken only with a view to gaining political success. The nationalization of banks was one such decision. The Government used all its strength to mould public opinion in its favour. This was the beginning of the withdrawal of
freedom and an attempt to move towards a closed society. The word commitment’, Dr. R.A. Singh says, came to acquire “the narrow meaning of allegiance to the ruling party and its programme. The more disheartening was the inability of education to protest against the state of affairs. The only way Nayantara pointed out was for the opposition to unite in order to be effective and to block anti-democratic legislation.”

He further says: “The Government policies and propaganda were aimed at creating a dichotomy between democratic ideals and social justice. The novelist stressed the point they were incompatible. It was no longer possible to take civil liberties for granted and the need for a concerted effort in order to prevent further erosion of freedom. Nayantara is critical of The Government’s policies which were motivated more by the need to make an ideology acceptable rather than by the actual needs of the people.”

Rich Like Us presents through the consciousness of Sonali, an I.A.S. officer, the evil consequence of the Emergency imposed on the country by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi (the Madam of the Novel) on the night of 25/26 June, 1975. According to Dr. Manmohan Bhatnagar, “The Emergency in all its political and human fall-out is graphically painted: trade unions crushed, news blacked out, bureaucracy politicized, in short, the silence of suspended animation has descended on the nation. Delegations of teachers, lawyers, school children, entrepreneurs and others pass through the notions of praising the leader for timely wisdom. Congregations and conferences mushroom to take on the chant. There are also woven into the narratives the factual bits like blinding of criminals and the
raid on J.N.U.” The Emergency resulted in the flouting of all norms and the curtailing of civil liberties in the name of political stability. During the Emergency most of the bureaucrats proved spineless and took pride in dancing to the tune of The Government. The sincere and honest servants like Sonali Ranade in the novel were demoted for not toeing the line of the Government which adopted measures to benefit the corrupt businessmen. On the other hand, those corrupt civil servants, like Kachru in the novel, were promoted to higher posts for working according to the instructions of the Government. The Bureaucrats help the Government in subverting the freedom of the people. Those leaders as well as their followers who appose the government and its imposition of Emergency are sent to jail, But the corrupt businessmen, who support all that the Government does, prosper in this period:

The troublemakers are in jail an opposition is something we never needed. The way the country’s being run now with one person giving orders and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the cabinet or in parliament, means things can go full stream ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons for ever. Strikes are banned. It is going to be very good for business. Perpetration of atrocities in the form of forced vasectomy and cruel inhuman treatment of the common man by the police were the order of the day. It looked as if Freedom had fled the country. This is what
people felt during a month’s censorship on Press after the declaration of Emergency:

The facts it is trying to conceal shriek out to be noticed. Since June 26th officially all was well but it was impossible not to be aware of the sullenness building up along New Delhi’s heavily policed roads, and news travelled from the old city of rioting when tenements were torn from under slum dwellers and they were packed out of sight to distant locations. It did not need much imagination to sense the hate and fear inside the vans with iron-barred windows, like the ones used for collecting stray dogs for drowning, that now roamed the streets picking up citizens for vasectomy.10

The sight of a young boy in Connaught Place being dragged by a policeman towards a waiting van brings out forcefully the atrocities perpetrated by the police during the Emergency. Sonali Ranade remembers the boy shouting and thinking to free himself, but in vain:

I could see his glasses lying there, cheap black horn rims for the next passer by to pick up or crush under foot. If human feeling failed me than, had I my professional training failed me too? What must an administrator do who sees a citizen kicked and cuffed and arrested for standing on the pavement talking. And if I had
never before seen power and authority so nakedly displayed on the pavement, wasn’t something wrong the way it was.  

After Sonali Ranade had been demoted for not supporting under rules a shady deal on foreign collaboration concerning a factory of a fizzy drink called Happyola, her sister Kiran came to see her. When she advised Sonali to meet the P.M. and explain the whole thing to her, Sonali explained to her sister that

The order obviously came from the top. You know perfectly well everything is controlled by one and a half people. And any kind of decision-making went to pot ages ago long before this Ridiculous Emergency. These words of Sonali clearly bring out the dictatorship into which democracy had passed in the country with the imposition of Emergency. The novel effectively brings out the nature and evil consequences of the Emergency:

The declaration of Emergency meant curtailing of freedom in many ways: censorship, erratic arrests, prevention of public meetings, picking up at random victims of vasectomy – suppressing the opposition of all sorts and monopolization of power. Using the past as a point of reference, particularly Gandhian age when love of freedom truly flourished, she contrasts it with the troubled seventies in
India and demonstrates convincingly that Emergency has put democracy in deep danger.\textsuperscript{13}

When elections to Parliament were held in 1977, the Prime Minister as well as her son (‘one and a half people’ of Sonali’s description) was defeated and with her defeat came to an end the era of dictatorship in the country. Kuldeep Nayyar, a famed journalist, brought out the excesses of the Emergency in his book, \textit{The Judgement}. People came to know about the excesses committed by the rulers and the administrators alike through the writings of the journalists of the time which strengthened in their minds the image of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as a fascist. As a result, the people of India went against her and threw her out of power at the General Elections. The ousting of Mrs. Indira Gandhi from power confirmed Nayantara Sahgal’s faith in people’s instinct for freedom, “…thus demonstrating a truth older than India’s political values, one that Mahatma Gandhi and his heirs recognized and served : that the individual is the unit of all progress and compassion the most powerful of history’s motive forces.”\textsuperscript{14}

Thus we see that in her novels Nayantara Sahgal shows her concern for and champions the cause of freedom, the freedom of the individual.

Marriage is another major theme of Sahgal’s novels. Marriage is an institution which is well established in society. In Hindu society it is regarded as a sacrament, not a contract. It leads to happiness when it is a union of body and soul, when both the partners enjoy equality and when they experience involvement and have their physical as well as emotional needs satisfied. If a man thinks of his partner as an
inferior and unequal one, or a woman does not share herself fully with her husband, or if they do not surrender themselves to each other, marriage, instead of becoming a source of fulfilment, will become a hell. In her novels, Nayantara Sahgal shows herself as being in favour of that kind of marriage which runs on the wheels of understanding and equality. She regards marriage as an ineradicable institution. Her women characters rebel against their husbands but do not think of going out of the fold of marriage. There are married couples in her novels – both happy and unhappy. The cause of unhappiness in the life of a married couple is the chauvinistic attitude of the husband towards his wife. For this type of man his wife is just a thing possessed by him and is meant just to cater to his physical needs. Such a man spoils the joy of marriage for his partner. This is what happens to women in their relationship with their chauvinistic husbands. According to Asha Choubey:

Sahgal’s novels present a study of the desert of loneliness experienced by women in their relationship with men. Her women are lively, avid extroverts before marriage, but marriage changes their destiny drastically.... They bear as long as they can, but beyond that they do not hesitate in breaking the marriage-bond, though they believe in its sanctity. 15

In her novels Nayantara Sahgal explores the causes of the failure of marriage arranged or otherwise and suggest how it can lead to happiness. This she does through the behaviour of the married
couples. Along with physical togetherness it is the mental and spiritual oneness of the spouses which is regarded by Sahgal as a must for the success of marriage.

Marriage is thought of by people in different lights. For some it is just a contract while others regard it as sacrament. But there is no denying the fact that denial of the equal status to a woman by her husband mars her marital happiness, makes her life miserable and does not let her play her role in the evolution of mankind for which she is most fitted. It is the male chauvinism in marital relationship that had led some thinkers to think of marriage as civil death of women. In his commentaries on the English constitution and on the laws of England, William Blackstone, for example, says,

By marriage husband and wife are one person in law, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything.\(^{16}\)

John Stuart Mill regards marriage as the worst form of slavery. According to him, “no slave is a slave to the same lengths and in so full a sense as a wife is.”\(^{17}\) Neena Arora is of the view that the power politics is always working as a motive in the relation of man and woman, reducing the status of a woman to merely a utility item, and object for decoration, for possession and for man’s sexual gratification.”\(^{18}\) It is man’s tendency of regarding his wife just as a thing and not as an individual that poisons the man-woman
relationship and makes marriage for her quite meaningless and unhappy. Only equality, understanding and reciprocity give meaning to marriage and make it a source of joy in life. In an article, Nayantara Sahgal has rightly emphasized the need for having “a whole new look at women not as the property of father, husband or son, and dependent on their bounty but as valuable human material to be brought to full flower and full participation in her life and events.”\textsuperscript{19} Sahgal’s women characters by their bold unconventionality can be said to be striving towards making men develop this new look at women.

Sahgal in her novels takes the issue of virtue, chastity and honour of women. She regards the question of virtue as archaic. She asks, “What is virtue in a woman? Is it compliance with society’s laws or should it be judged by a larger vision or standard?” When she was asked about her idea behind her creation of the character of Uma in \textit{This Time of Morning}, She replied, “A women 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.”\textsuperscript{20} She condemns the tendency of men to make chastity a weapon of oppression of his life partner. Before expecting his wife to be wholly chaste, a husband ought to give a proof of his complete chastity. The adoption of dual standards by men in the matter of chastity deserves only condemnation. Inder in
Storm in Chandigarh is one such character. His wife Saroj’s pre-marital affair becomes to him a pretext for tormenting her while he himself indulges in extra-marital affair with Mara. Similarly, double standard is embodied in Mr. Narang in “A Situation in New Delhi” who enjoys ogling at lovely women but feels that his honour is endangered when his daughter Neeta lights a cigarette. It is this kind of double standard on the part of men which leads to the unhappiness of their wives and hence is to be condemned and discouraged.

There are two kinds of women in her novels and they help us in understanding Sahgal’s attitude towards marriage. According to Asha Choubey, “As in life, so also in Sahgal’s novels, we find two types of women characters. In the first group are women like Lakshmi and Devika of A Time to Be Happy, Mira of This Time of Morning, Gauri of Storm in Chandigarh and Mona of Rich Like Us who present a picture of subdued womanhood. Some of these remain happy and content in the confines of conservative values, while some others though not happy, are too timid to walk out of a wrong marriage despite consequent humiliation. The second group consists of women with whom Sahgal identifies herself to some extent. Rashmi of This time of Morning, Saroj of Storm in Chandigarh, Simrit of The Day in Shadow, Sonali of Rich like Us, Anna of Plans for Departure and Bhusan Singh’s mother of Mistaken Identity fall in this category. Once they discover their marriage is wrong, nothing can stop them from breaking its bond”.

Though their traditional background hampers for some time their resolve to revolt against marriage when it has become an ‘empty shell’
one, they do not hesitate to break the bond of marriage when their husbands refuse to treat them as their equals and continue to ignore their emotional needs.

When marriage becomes a failure, Sahgal’s women characters show boldness in taking recourse to divorce. Closely associated with the theme of marriage is that of divorce in her novels. Some of Sahgal’s women find solutions to the misery of married life in breaking marriage bond. In the novel *This Time of Morning*, Rashmi decides to sever her marriage bond with Dalip after her wrong marriage has made her “a moth trapped in cement,” though her decision fails to win the approval of Mira, her mother. Similarly, Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* leaves her home when it is just reduced to a house. One thing remarkable about her decision is that she is helped by her relatives in taking it. This shows that divorce is getting free from the stigma generally associated with it. In this respect her lot is better than that of Rashmi. It is in *The Day in Shadow* that Sahgal dwells on the issue of divorce at great length. In this novel Simrit and Som are temperamentally different from each other, and so their marriage, instead of being a source of happiness, becomes a source or misery. They differ from each other in respect of ideals also. Simrit follows high ideals in life whereas her husband Som has made God of money. It is this obsession of Som with money that makes her dislike him. It has been well observed that “money had been part of the texture of her relationship with Som, an emotional forceful ingredient of it, intimately tied to his self-esteem. Money was after all a form of pride, even of violence.”23
Since Som belongs to “the he-man school whose male-dominance is the most formidable cult” Simrit fails to get from him what she expected when she had married him against her parents’ wish, namely, communication and equality. So miserable becomes her married life that divorce remains the only way out of it. The terms of divorce in the case of Simrit are as harsh and involve as heavy a responsibility for taxes as were those of Nayantara Sahgal when she obtained divorce from Gautam Sahgal. But divorce is not a difficult matter in India at all. Simrit observes rightly that it takes a year to get a Birla car, five to get a fiat, but “you could get a divorce by mutual consent at the drop of a hat. The Hindu Code Bill had jumped two thousand years of tradition to confer that twentieth century blessing.”

Though from a suffering woman’s point of view divorce is a blessing, people’s attitude towards a divorced woman is not good. Nayantara Sahgal in The Day in Shadow dwells on the attitude of people towards a woman who has taken an audacious step to seek and obtain divorce from her husband. The behaviour of people towards Simrit after she has obtained divorce shows that though the law has changed, the attitudes have remained unchanged. After the divorce of Som and Simrit, Ram Krishan’s following comment brings home to the reader’s mind this point: “The Hindu woman traditionally has no rights apart from what her father or her husband chooses to bestow on her. The law has changed some of that, but attitudes haven’t changed much…. What Ram Krishan further says brings out the cruel tendency of men to exploit women even after divorce has
taken place between them. He says that it is really sad that in India a woman can apparently still be used as a convenience for tax purposes by her husband even after he has divorced her. Here we hear the voice of the novelist herself.

Society does not look upon a divorced woman as an object of praise. Though divorce is a blessing for a divorced woman and speaks of her courage in taking this step to end her miseries, society becomes inimical to her and far from getting support from her fellowbeings she has to face their animosity. Such a woman becomes a sort of pariah for members of her own sex at parties. Simrit discovers that after her divorce from her husband, people look at her face as if it reflected the after effects of small pox. The following words emphatically bring out the pathos of her plight:

Wasn’t it odd when you were standing by yourself, fully a person, not to be asked what you did? There was such an enormous, separating gulf between herself and these women, most women, most people. May be the question would be different in the twenty first century. Simrit herself had never accepted a world where men did things and women waited for them. 26

Thus, divorce, instead of solving Simrit’s problems, threatens the smooth running of her daily existence. Her life becomes all the more miserable when her son Brij, seduced by his father’s offers to send him abroad, leaves him. Such a situation can be avoided if divorced
women learn to give up passivity by not letting things just happen to them. In the words of Shyam M. Asnani:

That Simrit, like most Indian women, can be easily exploited because she is so “eminently exploitable”. She is portrayed as a passive creature to whom things happen. Even when the economy of the settlement is explained to her she cannot bring herself to believe it, much less to fight for it. The indignation of the author at Simrit’s hopelessness and appalling situation is clear when says that “divorce for women nature is like a sin, and in expiation of her share of guilt she stays mute and acquiescent over the settlement, willing to accept it as part of Karma.”

Hinduism is one of Nayantara’s main concerns in her novels. As a way of life, it has influenced Indians’ political and social attitudes. Some, like Trivedi in Storm in Chandigarh, are disturbed by its “lack of definition” while others criticize it as a bundle of contradictions such as violence and non-violence, materialism and spiritualism, acquisition and sacrifice. There are still some who voice their dissatisfaction over Hinduism as it is practised and wish that it would have been better if it had been less of philosophers’ religion and more of the religion of the ordinary beings. There is difference between the philosophers Hindu religion and the Hindu religion as practiced by its adherents. According to S. C. Dubey, “Hinduism... as it is practised is
not the Hinduism of the classical philosophical system of India, for it possesses neither the metaphysical heights nor the abstract content of the latter.” 28 Hinduism has won a high praise for having touched great heights of thought. The philosophy of Advait (non-duality) is regarded as the highest flight of human thought in the realm of philosophy. According to this philosophy each and every individual is one with the absolute. There is no difference between them. The Upanishads preach that one who sees himself in all creatures and all creatures in himself is free from the feeling of hatred. His heart overflows only with love that leads to self-realization. Hinduism speaks of four goals of human life: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. Of these the first three are the instrumental goals and the last is the final goal of human life. One can achieve Moksha or freedom from the cycle of birth and death by pursuing Artha (money) and Kama (desire) in the spirit of Dharma or religion as enunciated in the Hindu scriptures. The Isopanishad shows how through non-spiritual knowledge one can free himself from the fear of death and achieve immortality through spiritual knowledge. The Gita exhorts Arjuna to act without caring for the fruits of his actions. Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that in all the three worlds there is nothing for him to do, yet he remains active in his life. So there is no freedom from action for anybody. In this way the Gita teaches the philosophy of action or the philosophy of renunciation in action. It was a source of inspiration to Lokmanya Tilak as well as to Gandhiji - the foremost leaders of struggle for India’s freedom. There is also a theory of Karma according to which our present sufferings and pleasures are an outcome of what we have done in previous
births. This theory appears to be responsible for encouraging passivity in Indians while it can also be taken as a challenge since it is in the capacity of man to shape a better future.

Indians are said to be born philosophers and hence they are more of introverts than extroverts. This becomes clear when Hindu religion is compared with semitic religions – Hebrew, Christian, and Islam are God-centered whereas Greek, Chinese and Indian religions are man-centred. But, as Professor Pratap Chandra says, while ‘God-centred’ religions emphasize man’s duty to the community, man-centred religions emphasize man’s duty to God through his duty to “the inner self.”

Nayantara Sahgal casts a critical look on Hinduism and finds that many defects have crept into it during its practice through ages. Vivekananda once observed that the religion of a Hindu was confined to kitchen. He said, “There is a danger of our religion getting into the kitchen. We are just ‘don’t touchists’. Our religion is in the kitchen. Our God is in the cooking pot, and our religion is ‘don’t touch me, I am holy.’ If this goes on for another century, every one of us will be in a lunatic asylum.”

Untouchability continues to be a stigma on the Indian community and the caste Hindus have so far not followed the teaching of Lord Krishna to consider others as their equals: Samatvam yoga uchyate (Equality is called yoga). Recently there have been incidents which demonstrate the scornful attitude the caste Hindus adopt towards people of scheduled castes. They go to the extent of madness in raising their voice against preparation of mid-day meals by a dalit (a
man or woman of low caste) in primary schools. In a school of the Kannauj District of Uttar Pradesh, the students refused to eat the food cooked by a dalit woman. It is reported that at the lunch-hour only 20% students remain in school while the rest leave for their homes. Similarly, in a school at the Jaithara town in Etah district, the students have declared that they would prefer going to jail to eating the food prepared by a dalit man or woman. These incidents go to prove that Mahatma Gandhi’s efforts to wipe out untouchability has not succeeded and Dr. Ambedkar’s dream of social democracy is yet to be translated into actuality. All this is certainly an outcome of the evil of casteism which is still rampant in the society and which is an hindrance to the establishment of communal harmony.

According to Dr. Manmohan Bhatnagar, “Sahgal traces the root cause of the people’s fettered political existence to the inadequacies of their faith as it is practised. By breeding escapist or indifferent attitudes to the pressures of the present Hinduism becomes an ally of exploiters – social, economic and political.”

In her first novel *A Time to Be Happy*, the two ways in which the philosophy of Karma (action) is interpreted bring out the duality of Hinduism. A dialogue between McLvor and the narrator highlights two views on the theory of Karma which is central to Hinduism. It is interpreted as the cause of the Indians’ fatalistic approach to life and as offering a challenge to men to build up a better future for themselves as it lies in their capacity to do so. The dialogue runs thus:

“Yet 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.” (Said Mclvor) “You are wrong”, I said, “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. True, your present condition is the result of your past life, but then it is equally true that what you do in this life will create the conditions for your next one. In other words, it rests wholly with you to better your status. There was never a more challenging philosophy. 32

Here, Mclvor’s speech fairly represents the author’s view of the Hindu philosophy of Karma, but this is what popular Hinduism has made of it. But the narrator’s interpretation of the theory of Karma shears it of its fatalism and points out that man is responsible for his future. The novelist seems to expect people to interpret the theory in the narrator’s spirit so that it may not empower the rich and the powerful to exploit the poor and the weak. As far as the charge of lack of definition is concerned, we can say that the tenets of the Hindu religion have evolved gradually as a result of the profound thinking of the seers of various ages. Unlike semitic religions, it does not have one prophet (or God), one book and one place of worship. Hence, there are many Gods and various places of worship dedicated to them and various
scriptures. All this makes it difficult to define Hindu religion. But lack of definition does not make it incomprehensible. Again, it is complained that Indians find the idea of renunciation more attractive than that of material prosperity or enjoyment of life. The opposite tendencies of materialism and spiritualism are seen existing side by side in India. The narrator’s reply to Mclvor’s statement that “Indians – or, rather you Hindus – seem very preoccupied with giving up things” is very significant in this respect:

“We are and we aren’t”, I pointed out. “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 the 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 form an early age that there is 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.”

33
This goes a long way to explain to McLvor, an outsider, the side-by-side existence of opposite tendencies in Indian life. Like these, such opposing attitudes as violence and non-violence, materialism and spiritualism and acquisition and renunciation are seen existing together and forming the pattern of Indian life. Jasbir Jain’s comment on Nayantara Sahgal’s attitude toward this duality in Indian life is very significant: “Nayantara’s awareness of this duality is, however, accompanied by a sense of genial tolerance and a belief that traditional religion can exist with a liberal, enlightened attitude and that it need not be an inhibiting factor in the development of life.” In the novel *A Time to Be Happy,* if Kusum grows up in a liberal atmosphere, there is Raghuvir, a clerk in Sanad’s office, whose consciousness of belonging to the Brahmin caste prevents him from taking up the higher paid job of a salesman as it will lower his social prestige and deprive him of a chance of marrying a girl of high family.”

Instead of making people active, the traditional faith makes them passive and fatalistic. Fatalism is a dominant feature of the Hindu’s life. On account of their fatalistic attitude towards life, they look satisfied with whatever comes their way as it is for them the working of Fate. Instead of rising against adverse circumstances and trying to overcome them, they let them overpower them and thus add to their misery. Gobind Narain sticks to his comforts saying that they are a result of the merit earned by him in his previous life. He is so lost in the comforts of his life that he has become insensitive even to an insult to his daughter Veena in the form of discrimination against her
by the English. At the annual fancy dress party for children held at Jenkins’s hotel, Veena was judged first, but she was awarded the second prize on grounds of her being an Indian child. The judges were forced to change their decision when a group of English women had protested against their having judged Veena first. When the narrator asked Gobind Narain if, in the name of his culture and traditions, if not his own personal pride, the insult to his child did not upset him at all, he replied with a twinkle in his eyes, “What are five thousand years of culture if they have not taught one to be polite.” The author seems to suggest here that Gobind Narain’s politeness is nothing short of cowardice that breeds inaction and is born of the theory of Karma in which he believes firmly. Then there is Savitri Sahai whose pride in the traditional India makes her indifferent to the burden of the foreign yoke she bears and prevents her from getting stirred into thinking out the ways of getting rid of it: “They have taken our land but they have not penetrated the inner sanctum, the real temple that is India. The realm of the spirit continues inviolate, soaring above the crushed hopes and the unborn dreams.”

Her fatalism comes to the fore in her cold reaction to the murder of her son by a tommy: “Each man can live only to his appointed hour.”

In her next novel This Time of Morning, Rakesh regards the Hindu religion as a “baffling uncertainty” and the reason for this he finds in the origin of Hinduism. He says: “Hinduism is neither a creed nor a religion but a way of life sprung from the soil, the stones, the mountains and the rivers of India.” Like Usman in A Situation in New Delhi, Rakesh regards Christianity and Islam as less ambiguous
religions than Hinduism. These are revealed religions and so, to Rakesh, they are easily defined and spell out clearly what they believe. On being questioned about Hinduism by Rakesh with a view to understanding it, Kailas Vrind explains to him the duality which is an inseparable feature of Hinduism:

It was a torpor that accepted maimed limbs, blind eyes and abject poverty as destiny, letting generations live and die in hopelessness, ant at the same time it was the majesty of the mind engaged in a life-long combat with the senses. You could not accept Hinduism in its entirety without harbouring ignorance and superstition, too. You could not wholly reject it without destroying part of yourself, for it was the story of India.  

The attitudes of Kailas and Hari Mohan in the novel illustrate two different approaches to religion. According to Jasbir Jain, while Hari Mohan approaches it as a tool to be used for political exploitation and personal salvation, Kailas wants to use it for moral enrichment of both the individual and society. It becomes the difference between secularism and fanaticism, between the “modern and the medieval mind.” Needless to Say, it is the former form of Hindu religion which is desirable and worth adopting.

The apathy of the people caused by Hinduism comes in for criticism time and again in Nayantara Sahgal’s novels. This apathy is seen at the public as well as the personal level. It is because of this
apathy and acquiescence in their destiny that demagogues like Gyan Singh in *Storm in Chandigarh* exploit the passivity of the people by inciting violence to serve their selfish ends. The faith of the people has rendered them incapable of rising against man-made evil aspects of life. The corruption of a Chief Minister or the cruelty of a husband leaves them unaffected. The resignation, inertia and paralysis of the people in the face of a severe political situation makes Vishal see the “funeral march of Hinduism” in Chandigarh. Saroj endures rather than opposes her husband Inder who treats her as a thing with no feelings of her own. This is perhaps because of her faith that preaches endurance rather than action. Similarly, on the political level, the virtuous inaction of Harpal, the Chief Minister of Haryana, in his unwillingness to face the strike provoked by Gyan Singh and the vicious action of Inder and Gyan Singh witness to the dilemma of Hinduism.

*The Day in Shadow* has rebellious protagonist in Simrit. She revolts against the creed of Manu who wants a woman to remain throughout her life under the care and control of a man (father, husband and son) and to shun freedom which in a woman’s case is nothing short of licentiousness which spoils her character. When, on account of temperamental differences, life becomes unbearable, Simrit dares to seek and obtain divorce from him. But the terms of consent are very harsh. She is to remain the custodian of business shares and pay taxes on them without gaining any profit from them until their son Brij attains the age of twenty-five and thus becomes entitled to own
them. Instead of revolting against these unjust terms, she accepts them. This is seen as a result of Hinduism. Ram Krishan tells her:

Retribution catches up... with people who do not face a problem. Religions are like public schools. Each produces a type, a uniform personality. The type ours produces doesn’t face up – it puts problems into cold storage... But I’ve found a way out of that.... To fight wrong... a man has to believe it is terribly important to fight it. ⁴⁰

The passivity of the people caused apparently by their faith upsets the revolutionary Rishad in A Situation in New Delhi. When he finds that the quarry workers do not feel worked up against their lot and the farmers wait “rooted to the patches of soil, for the rain to come” he realizes the futility of the theory of revolt against the circumstances. Rishad sees the point when Usman, the Vice-Chancellor of the Delhi University, speaks of the duality inherent in the philosophy of detached action taught by the Gita. He interprets detached action as thoughtless action which is likely to end in brutal violence. Since violence threatens to engulf the whole of country, he holds the philosophy of the Gita responsible for it as it has failed to give constructive guidance to the youth. Though Usman acknowledges the fact that the moral lesson of acting in a detached spirit or without the thought of result is capable of bringing out the best in him. Thus both Usman and Rishad point out the weakness inherent in Hinduism which prevents it from giving appropriate guidance to the people.
In *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal shows through a dialogue between Sonali’s father and the family barber how in fatalism Indians find answer to all their questions and on account of their faith in Fate live a passive and acquiescent life. Sonali’s father tries to explain to the barber that drought is caused not by curse but by lack of rain. But instead of understanding the logic, he wants him to tell what causes lack of rain. When it is explained to him that rains depend on certain atmospheric conditions, the barber is not still satisfied and he asks what causes those conditions. This catechism ends with the conclusion that “there was definitely a Reason which chooses to bless or punish.” 41 Nothing but passivity and inertia will be produced by belief in this “Reason” or Fate. Mona in the novel illustrates an important aspect of Hinduism. For Hindus life is a part of continuum. They believe that before coming into their present existence they had lived on earth and will not cease to live after their death but will be reborn in some form of the other. As such, they are accustomed to seeking answers to their problems in terms of the past or in those of the future. Thus, instead of blaming her husband for marrying again, Mona calls “upon the Almighty to spell out what she had done in this or past lives to deserve such outrageous treatment.” 42 Like many other religions, Hinduism is not free from superstitions. The sati of Comor, whose account is taken from the file of Sonali’s father, is described as a “victim of superstition.” She had immolated herself under the belief that “the present (was) the third time of her soul’s reincarnation” and that “she would be recompensed...hereafter.” 43
Hinduism believes that there is providence in everything that happens. So it is in their nature to conform to it. When the Madam imposes Emergency on the country, this is taken as divine dispensation and the people are left with no alternative but to conform to it. The Madam becomes a “many armed goddess” to the people and, for them, forms with her father and her son the Holy Trinity. The delegations of teacher, lawyers and school children call on her and congratulate her for declaring Emergency which was really an onslaught on democracy. Many prominent intellectuals justify the dictatorship of the Madam. This shows that a significant cross-section of the Indian society was rendered spineless by their faith. Thus, *Rich Like Us* exposes the weakness of the popular Hinduism.

Nayantara Sahgal’s criticism of Hinduism in her novels is creative. Religion is indispensable but only that religion which makes people progressive, not the one which is weighed down by the dead weight of stagnant ideas, is desirable. It should enable people to derive strength from the past to understand the present and face the uncertain future. Otherwise one cannot help thinking with Trivedi: “What use was this heritage to ordinary men? What did it create but quietude? Did it toughen fibre, give emotional satisfaction? Did it help the soldier to fight better, the business-man to do his job better?” After reading her novels, we feel that Hinduism needs antidotes, and these antidotes can be provided by the practitioners of this faith by their active involvement in the immediate environment, by not making the past responsible for their misery but turning it into a force to enlighten the present and to give confidence about the future. There
is a need to prove false what Vishal Dubey says in *Storm in Chandigarh*: “I think our grandmother does have a formidable influence on what we do. In a number of ways she is still alive. Sometimes I think it will need a tearing up by the roots to get her out of the way.” 45 Jasbir Jain justifies Nayantara Sahgal’s attitude towards religion in these words: “...she is quite right in her regret that the vast spiritual resources of Hinduism are being frittered away by a superficial adherence to rituals and religious orthodoxy. Hinduism must, and any religion for that matter should, shed its purely religious role to become a living tradition.”

Gandhism, with its concern for the individual and non-violence, made a special appeal to Nayantara Sahgal and forms a major theme of her novels. For her, Gandhism is not just a political ideology; it is almost synonymous with humanitarianism. On the occasion of Gandhiji’s birth centenary, a seminar on the Gandhian ideology was held in New Delhi. It was attended by an international team, which consisted, among others, of Lord Byod-Orr, Professor Jucci, Dr Daftri, Acharya Kripalani and Humayun Kabir. This seminar reached certain broad conclusions regarding the Gandhian approach to personal, national and international problems. On the individual plane, mastery of the self through freedom from hatred and fear would be the way of salvation; on the national plane, all inner tensions must cease through the elimination of the lust for power and the mania to dominate other men; and on the international plane, the use of violence should be given up once and for all, and disputes should be resolved through peaceful negotiations.46 In my humble opinion, the eleven vows or the
ekadash vrata, which Gandhiji observed very strictly and wanted his followers to observe with no less strictness, sum up the main aspects of the Gandhian ideology. These vows are: *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *asangraha* (non-hoarding), *sharirashrama* (physical labour), *aswad* (eating tasteless food), *sarvatra bhayavarjana* (freedom from fear everywhere), *sarvadharma samanatva* (regarding all religions as equal), *swadeshi* (love of things made in one’s country), and *sparsh-bhavana* (untouchability). According to Acharya Kripalani, the Gandhian ideology consists of six major concepts. These are *satya*, *ahimsa*, *satyagrah* (passive resistance), *swadeshi*, *sarvadharma samanatva* and *sarvatra bhayavarjana*. 47 As a political thinker, Gandhiji wanted the political consciousness not to remain confined to the upper classes but to reach down to the humblest sections of the society. The welfare of the individual had a significant place in Gandhiji’s scheme of things. According to Manmohan Bhatnagar, “The essential attribute of Gandhi’s notion of democracy was its participatory character down to its humblest constituent.”48 He was a true democrat to whom the very idea of tyranny was unbearable. It was the individual that was at the centre of his political thought. He once said, “I mean the welfare of the whole people and if I can secure it at the hands of the English, I should bow down my head to them.” 49 After reading Ruskin’s book *Unto This Last*, Gandhiji had developed the concept of *sarvodaya* (the welfare of all) and had set it as a goal for the independent India.
Nayantara Sahgal’s emphasis on the individual in her novels brings out her firm faith in Gandhism. According to Dr. Manmohan Bhatnagar, “The individual is the most important factor in Nayantara Sahgal’s thinking. The individual is the criterion with which she judges all issues in politics and religion, sociology and ethics. She is unsparing in her scathing expose of degeneration of ideals in politics where the individual becomes just a pawn in a game with bigger stakes.” 50 He further writes : “As one moves from the rambling tone of Happy to the drum-beats of Situation and the topsy-turvy world of Rich, one finds not merely Gandhian protagonists but Gandhism yielding to populism, parochialism, jingoism, fundamentalism and obscurantism. In this scenario, obviously it is the individual who is at the receiving end. However the Gandhian in Nayantara Sahgal makes her espouse her concern for qualitative humanitarian values. In each of her novels, she reveals herself as a social and political visionary most seriously, with all her positive heroes revealing shades of Gandhi in them.” 51

In A Time to Be Happy the Gandhian ideal of the welfare of the whole people is embodied. The narrator and Sohanlal in this novel have a constructive programme of rural reconstruction aiming at the growth of the people in sociological, economic, religious and political realms. In This Time of Morning KailasVrind gives expression to the author’s concern for the individual in a political set-up. He stands for moral values and feels that no change involving the erosion of moral values will be good for the people. He says :
In all my dealings with human beings I have discovered no magic formula for change – not as long as you consider the human mind and its willing co-operation necessary to your task.... We have made the human being the unit and measure of progress, so we can never abandon our concern with him.  

The individuality, according to Gandhiji, is “the one supreme consideration.” The state must aim at the development of individuality, “which lies at the root of all progress.” The importance that the individual has in Nayantara Sahgal’s vision comes out in the following words of Kailas addressed to Rakesh in This Time of Morning:

“Government will begin when this man, and that one 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.” 

This is what Kailas means by a Government and his views expressed here can be said to represent those of all the other positive heroes of Nayantara Sahgal. It is the concern for the role of the individual in the state that makes Sohan Bhai in A Time To Be Happy have first hand contact with “the agony of the people in the street.” He stands for ‘saintly politics’. Shivraj, the deceased Prime Minister in A Situation in
New Delhi, was deeply committed to the people. Like Nayantara Sahgal, he thought of the crowds as built up of individuals rather than as a “thing,... a mass of clay, for someone else’s use.”

His reminding Michael of the sermon on the Mount, which had deeply influenced Gandhiji, shows his concern for the welfare of the masses. Gandhiji always thought of the individual in the social context. Hence he emphasized need for the willing submission to social restraints as it will result in the good both for the individual and the society as a whole. *Rich Like Us* has for its theme the consequences for the individual of the imposition of Emergency on the country. Sonali in her sufferings during the Emergency represents the sufferings of the masses. The evil effect of this measure on the freedom of the individual finds an effective expression in these words of Sonali:

> In the hour or so since the radio had told us about the declaration of an emergency, our voices had automatically sunk to whispers. In Nazi Germany... people used to muffle their telephones with blankets as a precaution against listening devices, but now technology was far, far beyond such precautions. For good or evil we were dwarfed or midgeted by it.

The Emergency got support only from those who fail to distinguish between authoritarianism and democracy. A group of intellectuals who have neither experienced deprivation and pain, nor have imagination powerful enough to feel the lack of freedom, call upon the P.M. and congratulate her on taking this hard measure of imposing emergency
to set things right, which actually was to save and perpetuate her rule. Their spinelessness shows how out of fear they had chosen to support the authoritarian rule which could not be expected to do any good to the people.

*Mistaken Identity* has for its themes self-knowledge through introspection and achievement of true freedom which is something more than political freedom. These themes are well illustrated through the lives of Bhushan and his mother. The novel brings out also the essential unity of mankind which does not recognize distinctions of religion and social background. For here the ‘ranee’ of Vijaygarh, in order to achieve fulfilment, marries a Muslim Comrade named Yusuf and her son Bhushan accepts the latter’s daughter as his wife. In this way, love is shown as triumphant. As far as the influence of Gandhianism on the characters of the novel is concerned, the following comment of Jasbir Jain is very significant: “Something of Bhaiji (a humble Gandhian) is rubbed off on Yusuf. And though out of all political ideologies discussed, satirised and laughed at, Gandhianism is presented as the weakest through the pathetic life of Bhaiji, it is the one which has made the strongest dent where human beings are concerned. Gandhi’s focus was on human beings, and Bhaiji despite all his limitations comes through as a man of integrity and honesty. Above all he is a man of tolerance. Both Bhushan and Yusuf learn from him. The monomania of one and the conversion of the other add up to a great deal. Each in the way he knows best, moves out of narrow concerns.” 58
The other tenet of Gandhian philosophy that made a great appeal to Nayantara Sahgal is related to *ahimsa* or non-violence. Truth and non-violence were to him two sides of the same coin. Gandhiji first said that God was truth but afterwards he said that he had come to believe that truth was God. He believed that a man could be said to have realized Truth or God only to the extent he had observed the principle of non-violence in his life. Under the influence of the Indian thinkers like Mahavira and Buddha and the American man of thought, Thoreau, Gandhiji forged the non-violent weapon of passive resistance to oppose the mightiest British Empire on which, it was said, the sun did not set. Explaining passive resistance, Gandhiji wrote in *Hind Swaraj or Indian Self-Rule*:

> Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal sufferings: it is the reverse of resistance by arms. When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force.... If I do not obey the law, and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves sacrifice of self. 59

To the question Isn’t passive resistance an act of cowardice? Gandhiji asked the counter question:

> Wherein is courage required – in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and be blown to pieces. Who is the true warrior – he
who keeps death as a bosom friend or he who
controls the death of others. 60

For Nayantara Sahgal non-violence is not merely a political
weapon, it is a way of life. It embraces moral values also, the
cultivation of which results in elimination of all disparities and in the
establishment of Ram Rajya or an ideal state. Through juxtaposition of
characters of different attitudes and temperaments in her novels she
persistently raises the question of the validity of non-violence versus
violence, of the priority of working for the welfare of all over seeking for
the fulfillment of one’s own interests. Her first novel A Time to Be
Happy is set in the immediate pre and post Independence period. Here
we see people fighting for their country’s freedom in a non-violent way
under Gandhiji’s leadership. They go to jail without raising arms
against the British officers. When the narrator is taken to jail, he feels
elated and expresses his true feeling thus : “Going to jail is a part of
battle. It is a form of service.” 61

In the Post-Independence period, non-violence takes the form of
constructive activities in the lives of the narrator and Maya. Instead of
taking any interest in power and money, they lead a life of dedication
and service to the people. Politics becomes a mission to them. Towards
the end of the novel, Sanad, an Anglicised Indian, develops a soft
corner for Indians and feels delight in treating them as his own people.
In This Time of Morning, Kailash Vrind, a staunch Gandhian,
reconsiders his views on non-violence and comes to the conclusion
that it is valid as a way of life, but not as a political attitude for a
sovereign state. But this does not take from the moral value of non-
violence. Jasbir Jain has rightly observed in this connection that “Gandhi himself had conceded the necessity of using force as a defensive measure but this had not reduced the moral content of the philosophy. Non-violence was a positive attitude and required constant striving towards courage and dedication.” There is a counter philosophy of violence which is known as communism. It offers a strong threat to the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence and the moral values associated with it. It has irresistible attraction for the poor and downtrodden. These people believe that it alone can bring them prosperity and enable them to live a life of dignity. Kailas Vrind realizes that communism had “taken to itself the ecstasy of the mystic, the rapture of the poet, the crusading order of the zealot and transferred them into the stuff of battle.” But the philosophy of communism does not find favour with him because it ignores the individual and the democratic processes which are essential to meaningful human development.

Storm in Chandigarh has for its theme the storm that Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab, seeks to raise by launching a strike to show his strength to Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of the newly created state of Haryana. He adopts all possible violent means to make people launch the strike with a view to further dividing the state on the grounds of religion, caste and language. The Union Home Minister sends Vishal Dubey to Chandigarh to foil the attempt of Gyan Singh to launch the strike. Encouraged by Vishal Dubey, Harpal decides to adopt all possible democratic and non-violent means to avert the imminent strike. In the meanwhile the Home Minister dies
and Gyan Singh calls off the proposed strike apparently, as a mark of respect to the late Home Minister whose authority he had intended to challenge through the strike. The courage that Harpal Singh shows in taking a stand against Gyan Singh is indicative of the spirit of non-violence. Jasbir Jain observes rightly:

The message which the writer wishes to impress upon is the courage involved in taking a stand against injustice and tyranny. This is the meaning of non-violence and the lesson which the post-Independence generation is compelled to learn all over again.  

There is storm in the family – life of three couples – Vishal Dubey and Leela, Inder and Saroj, and Jit and Mara – in the novel. According to A. P. Pandey, “A close analysis of the novel shows that the family life gets disturbed to an alarming extent due to the steep fall in moral and human values. In a nutshell, it can be said that the social relations are characterized by the anti-Gandhian ideals, such as violence, hatred and moral degeneration. The three couples presented in the novel are people of uncompromising bent of mind and are not willing to clinch the delicate issues of personal life by peaceful negotiations. The moral turpitude, lack of understanding and prevailing violence in family are solely responsible for the family break-up.”

In *The Day in Shadow*, it is Ram Krishan who is the torch-bearer of non-violence and defines it in his own way. He has faith in non-violence, but he is pained to find that it is neither properly shaped nor
institutionalized. In the West people are so impressed by the doctrine of non-violence that they have now started to regard violence as an evil. But, says Ram Krishan, “We, on the other hand, have always recognized non-violence as a value but we’ve never given it form or shape, never popularized or institutionalized it, never even put to music! No catchy songs about it that would capture the young, become part of the airbreath.”

When Simrit is divorced by her husband, she is to be heavily taxed owing to the consent terms she has signed. Ram Krishan advises to go forward and oppose this injustice done to her by her husband as this “could be non-violence for you – the refusal to bend the knee and bow the head.” Needless to say, here fearlessness becomes synonymous with non-violence.

Simrit, too, has an unshakable faith in non-violence and wishes it to pass on to her children. She says to her son Brij, “I have nothing to give my children, because I have nothing to give them except non-violence.” Brij does not see eye to eye with his mother on the importance of non-violence and refuses to inherit it from her as he believes that big as well as small problems of life can easily be solved through use of force. Simrit is shocked to hear him say, “That’s all right mama. What are you worried about? I’ll beat him up if he says anything.” So great is the impact of non-violence on her mind that she wishes it to be legalised so that it may become a way of life. She says,“(I) have wished non-violence had become a way of thinking, made into a law, or given some kind of sanction, so that it could be passed on like an inheritance.” In this way, through Simrit and Ram Krishan, Nayantara Sahgal voices her views on non-violence.
Rich Like Us deals with the violence of the State during the Emergency which was imposed on the country by Mrs. Indira Gandhi on 26 June, 1975 and which is known as her murderous assault on democracy. This violence manifested itself in the crushing of trade unions, censorship of the Press, politicization of bureaucracy resulting in the harrassment of sincere and dedicated officers like Sonali, forcible vasectomy, the “midnight knock” leading to the arrest and incarceration of political leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan and the descent of the silence of suspended life on the country. This was a far cry from the moral values preached by Gandhiji for whom the individual and his freedom were of the paramount significance. The novelist is, however, hopeful that people will understand the mockery of Emergency and fight a non-violent battle for the restoration of their fundamental rights. This hope was fulfilled when in the 1977 elections people threw Mrs Indira Gandhi out of power.

The debate on violence and non-violence figures in Lesser Breeds also. Eknath in this novel is a representative of those who believe that only through the use of weapons can freedom be achieved whereas Nurullah represents those who believe in the value of non-violence as soul-force. Eknath sarcastically speaks of the experiment of non-violence as one doomed to failure. This is how he emphasizes the need for weapons in the struggle for Independence:

‘Non-violence is a great experiment’, conceded Eknath. So was that fellow’s who flew too near the sun and crashed down in cinders. But since time began every mother’s son has gone
to war armed with something, sticks and stones, bows and arrows, whatever. A regular armoury was discovered in the house where they used to meet. We need to get ourselves some military training. For one thing it would leave the loafers less time to stand around picking their noses, scratching their crotches, and hooting and screeching at matinees.”  

But the doctrine of non-violence sounds absolutely real to Nurullah. The novelist writes: “Up these, close to the spinning planets, the voice from the hut saying Non-violence is not submission, it is the soul’s unvanquishable strength and power or ‘I want India to recognize she has a soul that cannot perish and that can rise triumphant above any physical weakness’ or ‘strength comes from an indomitable will’ rang in Nurullah’s ears with absolute reality.”  

He finds support from a passage in Shelley’s poem The Mask of Anarchy which he paraphrases thus: “If we are to stand the final heat of the battle we must learn to stand our ground in the face of cavalry or baton charges and allow ourselves to be trampled under horses’ hooves.”  

It was, indeed, the soul’s unvanquished strength that made the Indians take on them the blows of the mighty British Empire without offering any resistance. Non-violence was seen in its purest form during the Salt March of 1930 when freedom-fighters under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi followed his command in word no less than in spirit: “Let the fist holding salt be broken but let there be no
voluntary surrender of salt.” This is how the novelist describes the non-violent fight on a day during this Salt March:

The temperature that day had been 116 in the shade but the quilt of bloodied bodies on the battlefield had lain boiling in the sun. No sooner the first contingent had fallen, the next had marched doggedly forward to receive the same treatment without an arm uplifted to ward off blows.... Afterwards in a temporary hospital set up nearby he (Edgar) had counted broken bones, gashed scalps and fractured skulls among the 320 casualties taken there. The better off among them had been kicked in the stomach and testicles.

To a man like Nurullah this behaviour on the part of the non-violent freedom fighters would have appeared sheer madness but not to the followers of Mahatma Gandhi who observed the vow of non-violence with superb excellence in face of the most powerful enemy. In 1942 Gandhiji launched The Quit India Movement and gave the slogan – Do or Die. There were violent uprisings which Peter Ryder regarded as a setback to non-violence. To this the narrator reacts in these words, “But a great step forward otherwise if we look at the effect they had on the Raj, which non-violence never did.” and she quotes Lord Linlithgow’s message to Churchill on 31 August 1942: “I am engaged here in meeting by far the most serious rebellion since 1857, the gravity and extent of which we have so far concealed from the world.
for reasons of military security.... The lives of Europeans in outlying places are in jeopardy.”

Peter Ryder looked at the narrator with old wise eyes and gave a reply which underlines the significance of non-violence in the freedom struggle of India: “Maybe they concealed the gravity and extent of the non-violent rebellion, too, for reasons of security will we ever know? Why would they make a dangerous new weapon public knowledge.”

Order versus disorder is also a theme which is dear to Nayantara Sahgal’s heart and which she explores particularly in her novel, This Time of Morning, to give direction to the country. Men of letters are, after all, unacknowledged legislators of the world. The theme of order versus disorder is introduced at the very beginning of this novel. Rakesh returns home after spending abroad six years as an Indian foreign service officer. He is shocked to see the chaos and confusion prevailing at the Palam Airport. It is his “memories of other more streamlined airports, well-modulated voices announcing arrivals and departures, the smooth efficiency of passport and customs officials” that flock to his mind and aggravate the sense of revulsion caused by the sight of things in disorder at the Palam Airport. Feroz Jussuwala’s comment on this incident in the novel is very appropriate:

With Rakesh’s arrival at Palam Airport and his reflection on his surroundings we have the author not only commenting on the recent situation but juxtaposing a form of disorder with a form of order.
Rakesh, who symbolizes order, sees a similar disorder in the office of his friend Saleem:

Rakesh looked at the green baize-topped desk piled high with files, and a side table laden with more files. The outtray overflowed. There was a tea-cup, saucer splashed with tea and filled with squashed cigarette butts in the tray. This tea tray had been moved to comparative safety on the pile of the day’s newspapers. Even the walls, with their uneven yellow distemper looked about to burst their confines. Untidiness spilled on a monumental scale, beginning with Saleem’s own person.  

Rakesh is vexed too see the disorder prevailing in Saleem’s office. He asks him if he never has a spring cleaning as half of those cabinets could be emptied. This is how Saleem gives a reply to Rakesh:

You have been away too long, Tidy Up! the last thing I warn Shankar about when I leave every night is not to tidy up.  

Disorders at the Palam Airport and in Saleem’s office are not confined to these places. It becomes symbolic of the disorder which raised its head in the wake of freedom in the form of self-seeking politicians who moved to the centre of stage. We are told: “Disorder was just round the corner, always, and no motley, crew of Parliamentarians would succeed in coping with it any more than picket fences would stem a deluge.” In this way, the theme of order
versus disorder expresses a desire on the part of the novelist for establishment of order in the society so that each and every individual may get an opportunity for progress in life. This can happen only when order is wrought out of disorder only through peaceful and non-violent means.

Thus we see that the themes which absorb Nayantara Sahgal’s attention and which she expresses in artistic terms in her novels are worthwhile and bring out her concern for the true development of the nation. They invest her novels with lasting significance.
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