CHAPTER IV

Nayantara Sahgal’s Narrative Technique

The art of story-telling consists in telling a story in such a way that the reader feels blessedly forced to read it with renewed interest from page to page and in making it a vehicle of his vision of life. Parallelism and contrast are essential ingredients of the narrative structure of a novel. Nayantara Sahgal employs these devices to narrate her stories. In each of her novels she knits the well-arranged incidents of the story into a coherent plot. Her stories move about in two worlds – the world of politics and that of personal life. And it is the integration of these two worlds that she seems to set as a goal for herself as an artist. She has succeeded to a great extent in achieving this goal. It is her broad concept of politics that enables her to integrate these two worlds quite easily. She has defined her concept of politics in these words: “I think of politics not as is leading the country or anything like that but politics as the use of power. And also the abuse of power. In our context it happens at so many levels–the domestic level – misuse of power between husband and wife, parents and children, between lovers – the way one human being wields power over another, that too is politics.... Power at the village level can be religious fundamentalism. It can be wielded in many different ways, and all of it is political.”

Nayantara Sahgal’s first novel, *A Time To Be Happy* has a well-knit plot. It has three well-defined parts: in the first part we are told Sanad’s and the narrator’s background; the second part is about
Kusum and her parents; Kusum and Sanad’s marriage and their married life form the subject of the third plot. Though the narrator says that he is telling Sanad’s story, yet he mixes a slice from his own life, namely, Maya’s feeling that she has found her soul-mate in him, his advance towards her and her withdrawal.

The story of Sanad’s life is told by the narrator in the first person. In this way the first person narrative technique has been employed by the novelist in this first novel of hers. Since the narrator knows all the characters and all the events take place in his presence, whatever he narrates carries the force of conviction and has the power to stimulate the interest of the reader. Meenakshi Mukherjee, an authority on Indian English fiction, in her criticism of this novel finds fault with the narrator’s personal intrusion in the story after his promise to tell Sanad’s story merely as an observer. The incident in his life connected with Maya may well be regarded as excreta on the plot of the novel since it contributes nothing to the total design of the novel. Meenakshi Mukherjee says:

In *A Time To Be Happy*, the narrator is omniscient and his job is to record the confessions of the hero in a definite order. He digresses here and there and apologizes directly to the reader: “The reader will forgive me if here, as in the past, I bring in a little of my own history.” In any case it is difficult to avoid the subject of oneself altogether in any account written in the first person. We are told
repeatedly that he is merely an observer, not an agent in shaping or influencing the course of events, that this is not his story, but the story of Sanad Shivpal. Yet when the onlooker who is supposed to remain on the fringe gets emotionally involved (as in the incident with Maya), then the point of focus gets blurred. This indicates a definite confusion in technique, because the narrator’s love for Maya contributes nothing to the total design of the novel and has no relation to Sanad Shivpal’s personal crisis, which avowedly is what the novel is about.  

Meenakshi Mukherjee certainly makes a point in her statement quoted above. But we cannot but agree with the fact that the narrator’s intrusion in Sanad’s story adds to its clarity and to the depth of human touch. The plot of the novel is coherent. This coherence of the plot is achieved by the novelist through the use of symbols. Speaking of Sahgal’s use of symbols, Manmohan Bhatnagar says, “These symbols, far from standing out intrusively, merge imperceptibly in the message they are charged with. The Sharanpur Club with its mixed clientele in Happy symbolizes the changed reality in post-Independence India.” In pre-Independence India the Sharanpur Club welcomed only the white people but after Independence it was thrown open to Indians and in this way it symbolized the victory of Indians in their fight against the British rule.
It is in this Club that Sanad and Kusum’s marriage is solemnized. In this way the Club symbolizes the spirit of freedom India has achieved and also the period when, India being under the foreign yoke, Indians were fighting to throw off this yoke and when they came out victorious in their struggle for freedom. Thus, the Sharanpur Club in its two forms suggests also the period covered by the incidents narrated in the novel. For, after all, the action of the novel spreads over sixteen years i.e. from 1932 to 1947 and little after. Besides the Club, the cottage industries, Khadi (hand-woven cloth), the spinning wheel, stars, the beggar girl with a dead child on her hips, and a dead carcass lying in front of Jent’s driveway in Calcutta are also powerful symbols which create atmosphere proper to the times depicted in the novel. The last two of these symbols bring out effectively the inhumanity of the foreign rulers.

Nayantara Sahgal employs the technique of parallelism and contrast to bring out similarities and differences between persons and their attitudes and between places. In the Shivpal family, for example, Govind Narayan’s philosophy of life finds an accurate expression in these words of the narrator:

Life had to be lived, daughters suitably wedded, and sons established in good jobs. These goals could best be achieved by taking a sensible view of the Raj, and using it to one’s advantage. 4

Like his father, Girish, too, believes in using the Raj to his own personal advantage. He is also like his uncle, Harish, in adopting the
British pattern of life. Harish has his prototypes in Harilal Mathur and Vir Das. All of them prove misfits in Independent India. But Sanad is different from them. He is an idealist searching for meaning in his actions. Unlike them, he is a nationalist who does not want to feel like a stranger among his own people. He does not approve of the tendency of his British employers to appoint Indians on a lower pay than the Europeans with equal qualifications. He develops love for Hindi and spinning. It is the transformation of an Anglicised Indian into a nationalist one that constitutes the core of Sanad’s story and lends a special charm to the novel.

Nayantara Sahgal employs the technique of juxtaposition and contrast to bring out the differences between individuals and groups, and their approaches towards life and its problems. In this novel, she contrasts the Shivpal family with the Sahai family and highlights their distinguishing qualities. Through this contrast she suggests artistically the desirability of the atmosphere of the Sahai family where there are no fixed rules and members enjoy freedom, get a chance to learn adaptability and develop into individuals. The narrator brings out the difference between two families through a symbolic description of gardens in the houses of these families:

Compared with the carefully clipped hedge, and beautiful flower-beds of Govind Narayan’s garden with its exquisite, expensive blooms imported from Europe, the Sahai’s was a tangle of colour that had sprung up in obedience to no particular design.
There is an incident in the novel which proves a catalyst in bringing Sanad closer to Kusum. This incident is the killing of Sahdev for not bowing to a Whiteman and moving off the road for him. Kusum, having been closest to him, is most deeply shocked by his death. This is clear from her mother’s concern for her, although she had taken to her son’s death in a stoic spirit. She wants the narrator to help Kusum forget the incident. But the narrator thinks otherwise:

It is the mistake we all make, trying to forget what has hurt us. We must remember. Only then can we see things in their proper perspective, the balanced whole instead of just the hurting part.  

The narrator is right in his thinking. As every cloud has a silver lining, the death of Sahdev and Kusum’s sorrow over it leads to the resumption of Sanad’s interest in her. When the narrator thinks of putting things in proper perspective for Sanad by telling him about Kusum’s family, he finds that Sanad has already met Kusum and presented flowers to her. In this way the incident of Sahdev’s death acquires a great significance in the novel as it precipitates the marriage of Sanad and Kusum.

In This Time of Morning, Sahgal adopts a broad framework to tell the story of change that took place in the country after Independence. The novel is crowded with characters, though much of its action takes place in Delhi. The major characters in the novel are Kailas Vrind, The Prime Minister’s reliable associate; Kalyan Sinha, the Minister without portfolio; Rakesh, a young unmarried I.F.S. officer; Sir Arjun Mitra,
The Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs; and Hari Mohan, an ex-Minister of Industry in U.P., Beil Benensel, a Danish Architect; Mira, Kailas’s wife and Rashmi, their daughter; and Uma, Mr. Arjun Mitra’s wife are other characters. Abdul Rahman, a moralist, and Dhiraj and Somnath, the opportunists, are the remaining characters in the novel. It is mainly through Kailas Vrind and Kalyan Sinha what they say and do – that the story of the Nehruvian era of the country, when a decline in the political ideals had started setting in, is told. The novelist employs the narrative method of juxtaposition and contrast in this novel also. Kailas Vrind and Kalyan Sinha are contrasted with each other and they are made to represent the clash of ideologies. The confrontation between Kailas Vrind and Kalyan Sinha is not just a clash between two individuals. It is, indeed, a clash between the philosophy of selfless service and that of self-seeking through politics. Kailas Vrind represents the former and his followers the latter. Similarly, Rakesh and Abdul Rahman are contrasted with each other. They represent love of order and indifference to order respectively. Both of them are officers in Indian Foreign Service. When Rakesh lands at Palam Airport, he is shocked by the disorderliness he sees around. He is equally shocked to see things in a disorderly state in Rahman’s office. This disorderliness is a change that comes immediately into the notice of Rakesh and it appears to be a result of the people’s being drunk with the newly achieved freedom. Jasbir Jain’s following comment on this novel brings out Sahgal’s artistic skill in achieving thematic unity in spite of the broad framework of the novel:
Though the framework is broad, the thematic unity is there and the novel emerges definitely as a political one concerning itself with both the corruption and the idealism of the political world. On the one hand, it provides an insight into the working of politics, on the other it seeks to explore the effects and outcome of these politics.\(^7\)

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Sahgal gives up the broad-based framework of her earlier novels and moves towards a better integrated plot. Here the number of characters is smaller than in each of her two previous novels. The political and the personal concerns in this novel run parallel and merge into an integrated whole through the catalytic agency of Vishal Dubey. The novel opens with a very significant sentence: “Violence lies very close to the surface in the Punjab.”\(^8\) This is the remark made by the Home Minister who has in mind the violence of approach and attitude adopted by Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of the Punjab, who announces a general strike to show his strength to Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of the newly created state of Haryana. But the violence spoken of by the Home Minister may be said to be visible on the social plane also. This problem of violence in politics and personal relationships and its solution form the contents of the story of Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh, and of the couples – Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara, and Vishal Dubey and Leela – whose lives constitute the social theme of the novel. Vishal Dubey forms a link between the political and social themes of *Storm in Chandigarh*. 
Vishal Dubey, a civil servant, is deputed by the Home Minister, who is rooted in Gandhian ideals, to neutralize the threat of strike by Gyan Singh and stop violence from eruption in Chandigarh. Harpal Singh feels that he is not capable of facing the threat of violent strike as he thinks that Gyan Singh’s proposed action is not based on any sound ideology. However, Vishal Dubey advises Harpal Singh not to submit passively to Gyan Singh’s threat. This advice makes Harpal Singh change his decision and he feels energetic enough to face the proposed strike. However, the death of the Home Minister makes Gyan Singh call off the strike in deference to him. This is how Jasbir Jain brings out the importance of the role played by Vishal Dubey in both the political and social worlds:

Dubey’s advice does pay dividends for the very act of having made a stand restores Harpal’s confidence and bestows a positive tone to the government’s functioning. Dubey’s own stand against Inder is made in the same spirit, motivated by a desire to check the spread and continuance of violence and aggression. When Inder hits Dubey, Dubey feels a “kinship” with Harpal... and with Saroj, another kind of victim, thus establishing an equation between the personal and the political worlds.  

In this way, Sahgal employs the technique of parallelism in relation to the themes as well as that of contrast and juxtaposition in respect of characters and gives us a coherent plot. As in her earlier
novels, in this novel, too, Sahgal employs symbols as an integral part of her narrative technique. The building of Chandigarh itself has a symbolical significance. Jasbir Jain says, “The building of Chandigarh symbolized a new beginning. It was ‘a starting from scratch’. But soon the untainted atmosphere begins to be tainted by the same cant. Jit feels that the architects “couldn’t find the right breed of human beings to inhabit their perfect blueprints.” Similarly, the mutilation of the wall painting in Inder’s office is a highly suggestive symbol. Manmohan Bhatnagar brings out the significance of this symbol in these words : “The mutilation of the wall painting in Inder’s office in *Storm* signals the vulnerabilities of the finer values of life in the face of brute violence.”

In *The Day in Shadow*, Sahgal further reduces the number of characters to move further in the direction of a more compact and tighter plot-structure. The novel tells the story of Simrit on whose life the cruel ‘consent terms’ cast a shadow, but she emerges out of it into the sunshine of freedom and happiness with the help of Raj with whom she ultimately settles down. The story attains authenticity as much of it is made of the author’s personal experience.

The political and the personal world run parallel to each other in this novel. There is, indeed, an umblical link between these two worlds in this work. In the political world, Raj is juxtaposed to Sumer Singh, who, though a political heir of Sardar Sahib, an upholder of Gandhian values in politics, is quite different from him as his determination to demolish the Gandhian ideals shows. And in the personal world, Raj is juxtaposed to Som, the inhuman husband of Simrit, who is the lone
female figure in the novel. Both these men with whom Raj is contrasted are of “a kind with no human difference between them.”

Brij, Simrit’s young son, is fascinated by gadgetry and this fascination brings to Raj’s mind Sumer Singh’s desire to break completely with the past. The question – how had such a future arisen from such a past ? has engaged the attention of Raj and made him think of Brij in relation to Simrit and of Sumer Singh and other unscrupulous politicians in relation to Sardar Sahib. When Simrit thinks of the cruelty of the ‘consent terms’, it is the similarity between her husband and Sumer Singh which strikes her at once. To Raj the extremely heartless terms of consent were a sort of Hiroshima.”

This political image of Hiroshima (the dropping of an Atom Bomb by the U.S.A. on the Japanese city of Hiroshima which resulted in an undreamt of disaster) makes the two worlds – the political and the personal – merge into each other imperceptibly.

As an artist Sahgal gives an artistic form to her message. It is through a contrast between characters that she expresses the desirability or otherwise of a point of view. Here she contrasts Raj with Sumer Singh on the political level. As Jasbir Jain says, “Their two worlds are contrasted.... One is a world of democratic values, the other has dictatorial tendencies and while Raj is willing to dedicate himself to the country, Sumer Singh is engaged in boosting his own ego. Yet the political reality cannot be denied or overlooked : it is people like Sumer Singh who are more powerful and effective and are the new rulers of the country.”
The novel opens with a grand party at the intercontinental Hotel. This grand party is hosted by Mr. Shah, who is Managing Director of Oil Products Ltd. and it is attended by political luminaries. The occasion is the new agreement between the Government and the Oil Products Ltd. to make petro-chemical products. The following passage from the opening paragraph of the novel brings out effectively the pomp and show of the political world of New Delhi:

The huge mirrors of the Zodiac Room at the Intercontinental, festooned in carved gilt, reflected everyone of consequence in the Ministry of Petroleum, and a lot of other officials besides. And their wives. And some of their daughters – the supple, flat-stomached young, with their saris tied low, showing their navels, their hair swinging long and loose, or piled high in glossy architecture. They were all enjoying the hospitality of Oil Products Limited. 15

This passage shows Sahgal’s skill in manipulating a context in support of the theme. This is an important aspect of Sahgal’s narrative technique. The passage quoted above emphasizes the luxurious lifestyle of the representatives of people, which is in sharp contrast with the abject poverty of the masses they represent. They have no time to think of improving the lot of the poor or solving their problems. Most of the politicians are like Sumer Singh who do not let any ideals come in their way of self-fulfilment. They progress, but the masses who elect
them suffer. Thus the context of the grand party is skilfully manipulated by the novelist to bring to light an important but repulsive aspect of Indian political life.

Sahgal’s next novel A Situation in New Delhi, registers improvement in her narrative technique. The novel is rich in symbolism. Here too she employs the narrative method of juxtaposition. According to Jasbir Jain, “With A Situation in New Delhi, she has entered a new phase of her creative career, for in this novel she has succeeded in going beyond the personal to the universal.” In this novel the novelist has juxtaposed tradition to the revolution through two sets of characters – Devi, the Education Minister, Usman, the Vice-Chancellor of the Delhi University, and Shivraj, the Late Prime Minister (whose shadow looms large throughout the novel) on the one hand, and Rishad, Devi’s son, Naren, a Ph. D. from Oxford University, and Skinny Jaipal on the other. Both these groups of characters have similar ends, but they think of adopting dissimilar means to achieve them. The first group tries “to bring in a new social order through peaceful negotiation, non-violent and democratic means and humanistic considerations”, while the other group “tends to create a new social set-up through any means without considering their justifiability and appropriateness.” There is, indeed, a sharp contrast between Usman and Rishad.

In this novel, Sahgal comes out against the unnecessary interference of the Government in the field of education, pointing out that such interference will do no good to the cause of education, instead it will hamper its proper growth. Usman, who is an
academician and Vice-Chancellor of the Delhi University, gives his well-thought-out suggestion to improve the existing pattern of education. It is through Devi, the Education Minister that he presents in the cabinet his suggestions for educational reform. These suggestions along with Michael’s book on Shivraj, as Jasbir Jain points out, “symbolize the need for a new society which, in essence, should be a continuation of the old.” Usman’s suggestions for improvement in the educational system of the country are rejected by the cabinet. He resigns the Vice-Chancellorship of the University. His resignation creates crisis in the novel. This crisis is of political nature. After this he decides to give creative leadership to the young. These events lead to a better understanding between him and Nadira, and Michael finds himself in a position to understand very clearly the goals which Shivraj endeavoured hard to achieve.

The failure of the Naxalite Movement led by Naren in achieving the desired change has an important message embedded in it. In the Independent democratic India it is the Parliament that ought to be an instrument of change. Violence is no solution of the political and social problems. Those who ride the tiger, as President Kennedy of the U.S.A. said in his inaugural speech, end up in its belley. In this novel Naren, Rashid, and Madhu, the victim of rape on the University Campus can be described as sacrifices to the creed of violence. Thus Sahgal suggests artistically the desirability of Gandhian ideals for achieving social progress. As Dr. Sudarshan Sharma points out, “She feels that they have more urgency in the present day situation and are more relevant in the present day context.”
Symbolism is also an integral part of the narrative technique employed by Sahgal in this novel. Madhu, for instance, tramples in the University office on the fallen picture of Shivraj, who after his death, has ceased to be a living force and is ignored by the teachers and the students alike. This stepping of Madhu on the picture symbolizes the end of the road for her. Similarly, the symbol of the oppressiveness of weather is very meaningful in the novel. It represents the oppressiveness of the political situation to various characters. Elaborating the meaning of this symbol in the context, Jasbir Jain says, “For Rishad the rain’s refusal to come pouring down is a ‘constant reminder of this in between state, neither life nor death’ in which many people lived. The weather oppresses Michael and Devi. The rain when it comes is like a breath of life.” These and other symbols used by the novelist enrich the language as well as beautifully reinforce the meaning of the narrative.

*Rich Like Us* tells through the consciousness of Sonali and of Rose the story of the Indian Emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, on June 26, 1975. Sahgal uses the narrative method of juxtaposition and contrast with a great skill in this novel. Here the present is juxtaposed to the past. Not only this, the past is seen as running into the present. Sonali represents the past in upholding the high ideals of the Gandhian era in which she was born and brought up. The age in which she serves the nation as an I.A.S. officer is a far cry from the idealism of the Gandhian age which serves as a lighthouse for her. In this age she fails but men like Ravi Kachru, who are always ready to lick the boots of the authority,
succeed. Sonali as the Deputy Secretary in the Ministry of Industry does not confirm the foreign collaboration in connection with the production of soft drink called Happyola for which the Minister had accepted the tip in advance. The Minister needs an officer who will willingly dance to his tune. Therefore, he transfers Sonali to her home state and in her place appoints Ravi Kachru and gets the deal confirmed in no time. This is what she says about her action:

It was a preposterous proposal, requiring the import of more or less an entire factory. Policy did not allow foreign collaboration in industry except under a complicated set of regulations, although the essential items the economy needed that we couldn’t produce for ourselves were exempt from the list. There were a number of those but a fizzy drink called Happyola wasn’t one of them. When the visiting representative came into my office, I told him so.  

As a result of her adhering to her principles, she has to suffer:

I hadn’t merely been transferred without warning, I had been demoted, punished, and humiliated, and I had no inkling why.  

Sonali’s present runs parallel to the past of her family. Her plight is like that of her grandmother who was made to burn herself near her husband’s pyre two days after his death. It was given out that she had committed ‘Sati’. But the reality was that she, being a bold and
courageous lady, was a threat to her greedy relatives. So she had to
die and Sonali has to resign because she was courageous enough not
to toe the line of the Minister and thus proves a hindrance to him in
his effort to get the deal confirmed. As Jasbir Jain says, “The split
narrative finally comes together when Rose dies and Sonali’s split
world coheres in an heroic effort to pull herself together.”

In the novel, the story of *The Emperor and His Clothes* is referred
to twice. These references are very significant. Sonali as well as Rose
refers to it. This is how Sonali draws upon this story to describe
Emergency as an attempt to perpetuate the family rule in the country :

> We were all taking part in a thinly disguised
> masquerade, preparing the stage for family
> rule.... No one wanted trouble.... To put it
> charitably, we were being realistic. We knew
> we were up against a power we couldn’t
> handle, individually or collectively.

Later on, Rose refers to the story of the *Emperor and His Clothes* when
she says :

> “Sounds like the Emperor’s new clothes to
> me”, said Rose, “First of all there’s no car, and
> then you nationalize the one there isn’t. And in
> all these years what you’ve saying, there isn’t
even a model.”

In the story some weavers dupe the Emperor into giving them gold to
weave him a suit of clothes. Their clothes are only products of their
imagination. Hence they are not real. They make him wear these
clothes or rather pretend to make him bear them. The courtiers admire the ‘clothes’, laughing in their sleeves simultaneously. They do so for the fear of ridicule. What can be the meaning of these references and how are they relevant to the story? The courtiers do not laugh openly though they ought to have done so to make him conscious of the reality. There is a couplet in the Ramacharitamanas, an epic of Tulsidas, which says that if the three – the Minister, the physician, and the teacher – indulge in praise out of fear, the government, the body and Dharma (the power of holding things together) go to the dogs very quickly. The Prime Minister’s resolve to impose Emergency on the country must have made the Ministers (her colleagues) praise it out of fear and the result was that she and her son were badly defeated at the hustings and came to lose power. We know that two of her trusted colleagues deserted her and joined the opposition after the revocation of Emergency. Actually, what she tried to hide was to the intelligentia of the country as clear as broad daylight. To save her Prime-Ministership and perpetuate her family rule was the sole reason behind the proclamation of Emergency. The other reference to Emergency by Rose is satirical and highlights the dishonest tendency of those in highest positions in public life to benefit their kith and kin out of nothing. Jasbir Jain’s comment on these references is quite thought-provoking: “On the face of it, The Emergency is a reversal of all that the past has stood for the “battles for freedom fought and won and all that sacrifice now come to this.” It is an act of discontinuity, abandoning all earlier norms. It is a world gone awry, where “everything was not all right.” But a deeper question being asked all
along is: is it a reversal? Who is to be blamed for the Emperor’s nakedness – the wiliness of the weavers or the conspiracy of the people?" She says further: “In the story of The Emperor and His New Clothes,” one doesn’t know whether the Emperor, the weavers, or the people are to blame. Reality eludes them all. Thus finally Rich Like Us is about the complex nature of reality.”

In this novel, Sahgal’s journalistic instinct, however, comes in the way of the artist in her. Dr. Manmohan Bhatnagar’s comment on this novel in this respect is quite appropriate: “Rich, especially, is interspersed with vague apprehensions, unsubstantial allegations and wild fantasy – all undigested in art – which would perhaps go well with journalism of a particular hue but do not with serious literature. Rich leaves one with the impression that political consciousness is rendered here in political rhetoric without being fully integrated with the gamut of life presented; it remains extraneous to art.”

Plans For Departure may be described as a celebration of transience. The title of the novel refers to the link that exists between the Brewsters and the Crofts on the one hand and Anna Hansen, Sir Nitin Basu and Madhav Rao on the other. They have come to Himapur just for three months as before the rains come, they will leave for plains. Nobody stays here long enough to grow roots as here the land may slide from under one’s feet any moment. In this way Himapur becomes a symbol of impermanence. Hence, all these characters will leave Himapur as will the British leave India one day.

There are three plots in the novel, Plans For Departure. The stories of the Brewsters and the Crofts constitute two of these plots.
These two stories run parallel to each other, but are different also. Both Henry Brewster and Marlowe Croft are empire-builders but with a difference. Whereas the former is concerned with consolidating the physical empire, the latter dreams of India’s becoming a Christian land one day. Stella Brewster differs from her husband in her attitude towards the hanging of Khudiram, and Lulu Croft from her husband in that she does not share his dream of India’s becoming a Christian land one day. Both of them try to get rid of their husbands-Stella successfully while Lulu unsuccessfully. Stella betrays her husband by falling in love with Pryor and runs away from her husband. But these two ladies are different from each other also. As Anklesaria says, “Stella Brewster and Lulu Croft come from similar backgrounds and share the values of Anglo-India, but there is stillness about the imperiously beautiful Stella which is far more dangerous than Lulu’s brash stridency.”

Through the portrayal of these characters the novelist brings out the Raj psychology which is an important theme of the novel. The third plot of the novel consists of Anna Hansen’s stay in Himapur. This is the main action of the novel worked on a small canvas. Anna occupies the centre stage in the novel. She is related to Sir Nitin Basu, a botanist from the University of Allahabad, as his secretary and to her Madhav Rao is a source of information about Tilak’s participation in the freedom struggle of India. Both, Sir Nitin Basu and Madhav Rao are nationalists and have their views of reality circumscribed – the former by his microscope and the later when he disappears under the black shroud of his camera while taking a picture. But Madhav Rao’s
seditious faith in Tilak stands in contrast with Sir Nitin Basu’s patriotism tinged by his loyalty to Gladstone and Queen Victoria.

The residents of Himapur, in-spite of spatio-temporal restriction, keep in touch with what goes on in the outside world. For this purpose she uses a variety of devices. One such device is newspaper items. Other devices are despatches to Henry from his immediate superiors and conversations between Anna and Madhav Rao about Tilak’s trial and imprisonment. Anna receives letters from Nicholas, a British diplomat and her fiancé, in which he writes of what is happening in Europe. It is through these devices that the novelist makes the residents of Himapur conversant with the happenings taking place in the outside world.

The novel has a centrifugal pattern, Anna Hansen starts from home and travels to different parts of the world in search of freedom and meaning. Decentring in the novel starts with the projection of Anna as the central consciousness in the novel. She is neither among the rulers nor among the ruled. She is, thus, outside the power structure in the novel. Yet she is at the centre of the novel. The process of decentring takes over with her departure to England as a result of her being afraid of her emotions and her inability to fathom the mystery of Stella’s departure, Lulu’s death and Juliet’s corpse. Though she is aware that there was nowhere she indelibly belonged, she experiences a classic sense of home-coming in England. The marriage of her son, Peter, with a girl from India also confirms the centrifugal pattern of the novel.
There is a world of myth and legend in the novel. It serves as an aid to the centrifugal pattern. Decentring is also helped by to and fro movement in time. The world of myth and legend in the novel takes us back to many centuries before Christ. Though most of the novel is concerned with the characters’ experiences in Himapur in the year 1913 and after Anna’s departure from Himapur, the story moves forward in time. Jasbir Jain says:

Decentring also takes place by moving to and fro in time. While dates are mentioned to provide a framework and revolution and mutinies recorded to hinge memories on them, there are childhood memories and racial and religious myths which defy time. Also people live on in the memories of people like Queen Victoria, who still dominates the pre-war years; like Henry Brewster who in a three-month period has left a lasting impact upon Anna, and the year 1913 stretches itself back to 1500 B.C. and forward to the present.... Sahgal achieves this centrifugal pattern not by presenting the other side of the picture, or the Indian point of view, but by projecting Anna as the central consciousness, a consciousness which embraces opposites, contains contradictions and is, to some extent, both absurd and romantic.... 30
Thus, we see that the novelist uses the methods of parallelism and contrast to tell the story of life led by the people of Himapur who have come there not to live permanently. She adopts the devices of newspaper items, letters from Nicholas to Anna Hansen and conversation between Madhav Rao and Anna Hansen about Tilak’s trial and punishment to describe the events taking place outside Himapur – in the country and abroad. There evolves a centrifugal pattern in the novel as a result of the projection of Anna Hansen as the central consciousness in the novel.

In *Mistaken Identity* there is a shift from the woman-centred narrative to a male-centred one. In this respect she returns to the technique of her first novel where the narrator is a male figure. The novel is the story of Bhushan, the scion of the Royal family of Vijaygarh, of his mistaken identity, of his several love-affairs told by himself. It is also the story of his mother’s release from the prison-like atmosphere of the Royal Palace through marriage with comrade Yusuf and of his own marriage with Yusuf’s daughter – both marriages symbolizing the fulfilment of Bhushan’s dream of Hindu-Muslim unity. Bhushan is arrested during a train journey and is thrown into jail for suspected treason. There is no doubt in his mind that he has been wrongly arrested and he will be released very soon. But unfortunately, he has to remain in jail for a long time. During his imprisonment he makes friends with other prisoners and tells them stories from his colourful past. It is through Bhushan that the novelist portrays various details. These details as Malashri Lal says, “are rich – the communal riots in Vijaygarh caused by Bhushan’s indiscretion, the
city people with their caste-class problems.” The narrative covers a period of three years. It “travels to and fro to bring the remnants of the past to our notice. It moves backward to the First World War, The Russian Revolution, to Bhushan’s birth, the mid-nineteenth century reform movements, the impeachment of Warren Hastings, further back to the past, ferrets out memories of invasions. It moves horizontally in the present in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, the Dandi March, the hangings, all these and many more. It examines the psychology of coining – slogans. And this baring of the past is initiated by the trial.”

The novelist has employed the technique of parallelism and contrast to narrate the story of Bhushan’s life effectively through his own mouth. There are similarities between Bhushan and his mother, the ‘ranee’ of Vijaygarh. It is Bhushan’s mother who understands him and is in full sympathy with him. Both of them are rebels. They find fulfilment through rebellion. The ‘ranee’ gets rid of her lascivious husband by running away from the prison-like palace and entering into wedlock with Yusuf. And Bhushan, after his unsuccessful love-affairs, marries Yusuf’s daughter, thus realizing his long-cherished dream of communal harmony.

While in jail, Bhushan comes into contact with activists of two ideologically opposite groups. One group consists of Bhaiji and two others who have recently joined the freedom movement. Bhaiji is a Gandhian, “who is in charge of setting up shops to sell Khaddar” and who firmly believes in Gandhian principles of truth, non-violence and Satyagraha as effective means to achieve independence of the country.
This group is contrasted with the other group which consists of Comrade Pillai, Comrade Yusuf, Comrade Dey, Comrade Iyer and Sen, a young boy of nineteenth. This is the communist group, which believes in the efficacy of violent means to deal with the worsening situation. Through these contrasting groups the novelist presents a view of two different ideologies and of their adherents who were waging in their own ways the struggle for freedom, which was their common goal. Bhushan feels that he is closer to the communist group than to Bhaiji’s party. He says:

Actually I have less in common with Bhaiji’s part than with the comrades who at least aren’t humbugs. Gandhi makes no sense to me at all. Goes on bleating about Hindu-Muslim love but a Hindu-Muslim marriage would send him on a fifty-one day fast.  

Though Bhaiji’s Gandhism repels the comrades, they find his influence irresistible. His words that every Indian ought to consider it glorious to go to jail strengthen the courage of every activist in jail. His power of tolerance is praiseworthy. Both Bhushan and Yusuf learn from him. When he dies, his funeral is attended by all as a mark of respect to him.

Besides the technique of parallelism and contrast, the novelist uses the element of fantasy to project her vision. The hero-narrator of the novel believes in and aspires for communal harmony in society. As Jasbir Jain has pointed out, “Like Orwell in his essay on Charles Dickens, Sahgal’s protagonist believes that ‘sexual unity’ was the acid
test of unity.” His mother’s marriage with Comrade Yusuf as well as his own with Yusuf’s daughter, with which the novel ends, appears to be a flight of fantasy, for in the 20’s and early 30’s of the last century the marriage of two persons of different religions, different social backgrounds and political beliefs was considered to be the stuff of which dreams are made. The liberation of Bhushan’s mother looks like a piece of wishful thinking on the part of the novelist. In an interview with Jasbir Jain, Nayantara Sahgal accepted the fact that an event like the Hindu ranee’s marriage with Comrade Yusuf, a Muslim, might happen in India today, but such a thing was highly unlikely in 1929-30. This goes to prove that there is certainly something of fantasy involved in the ending of the novel. Here is a part of the interview:

J.J.: Would you say this (The liberation of Bhushan’s mother) can happen in real circumstances in India today?

N.S.: It is highly unlikely. Today it might happen, but not in 1929-30.

J.J.: It could have happened ten years ago, but today at the moment? In today’s context it reflects an unconscious need, an emotional possibility – in a way a fantasy. When I was trying to interpret the ending of this novel, I realized that you have been using a lot of fantasy. Maybe every writer uses some element of fantasy.

N.S.: Of course. 35
Though the element of fantasy cannot be denied in the ending of the novel, it would not be proper to say that the ending is unnatural. The ending is, indeed, a natural outcome of what has gone before. Jasbir Jain’s conclusion about the ending of this novel is quite appropriate: “Thus the ending which appears at first glance to be an indulgence in fantasy, a kind of after thought thrown in, is a natural move towards a logical conclusion…. There are many like Bhushan and his mother who need to be liberated from mistaken identities to find their true selves.”

Thus, *Mistaken Identity* is a fine example of the novelist’s artistic excellence.

*Lesser Breeds* has three parts. The scene of action in the first part of the novel is set in Akbarabad. Akbarabad in the novel is thinly disguised Allahabad where the novelist was born and brought up and with which she is fully conversant. The following passage from the novel clearly points out that Akbarabad is Allahabad itself: “From here they look a tonga to the river road and got down on the sandbank where the Yamuna’s clear blue waters swirled into the Ganga’s muddy tide.” We know that the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna (and the invisible Saraswati) takes place only at Allahabad. The first part is related to India and her past in which Nikhil popularly known as Bhai leads a Kisan rally against the British Raj and is arrested along with other activists. Like Nikhil, his mother, too, is wholeheartedly devoted to Gandhism. She spends ‘a ritual hour spinning thread on her charkha everyday, fulfilling her party pledge to spin two thousand yards of Khadi thread a month.” Later, Nikhil is arrested in the disguise of a Sadhu and is tried for treason. He is convicted and
hanged. His mother is not allowed to be present at his hanging. But so intertwined were the strings of her heart with those of her son’s that ‘hearing it was over, she had gone to her room in shock, lain down on her bed and died.’ As Nayantara Sahgal says, “The past (in the novel) concerns the effect of non-violence on a whole household. In some ways it is a kind of parody of what non-violence does to the household and others who are believers in it—the kind of strange household it produces.”

The story is told by the narrator to Peter Ryder, a student of politics, who has come to India to do research work on non-violence and its use of soul force. The narrator points out that the young research scholar has “a romantic idea that ‘ahimsa’ is an underground Indian river, now hidden, now surfacing, but always present in our culture and consciousness.” The narrator disagrees with him and says, “Come to think of his allegiance to non-violence – for he is a pacifist – reminds one of the movements he is researching, when people committed their lives to an idea whose time will never come.” In this way the narrator contrasts the idealism of the young pacifist in respect of non-violence with the practical view of its unpracticability. In the novel, it is Nurullah who stands opposed to Bhai as far as the ideology of non-violence is concerned. The unquestioning devotion to non-violence on the part of people like Bhai leads to strange results. The employment of the principle of contrast continues in the second part of the novel also. Here Edgar Knox is in direct contrast with the American authorities who see no sense in his suggestion for extending support to the freedom struggle in India. He had said before the
Senate Sub-Committee for Internal Security, “They would have been our allies if we had backed their demand for Independence. They kept beseeching the United States for support.”\(^{43}\) He was dubbed a communist by the committee. To the narrator, “He was a lover of mankind and of Jazz.”\(^{44}\)

It is Shan’s presence in the United States for higher education that links the first part of the novel with the second. Shan goes to the United States to receive higher education under the care of Edgar Knox. She receives there not only the college education but sex education also through her affair with Otto Shelling, a German, who instructs her in the intricacies of music. There is a scene in the novel concerned with Shan’s sex education, which a young reader will always read with his heart beating a bit more loudly. This passage is given below:

Suddenly Otto fell (but more systematically than Janey Ann’s dates) into the order of events. He gravely unwrapped Shan from her Conjeevaram Sari and deposited it with infinite care in a heap on a piano. Next he laid her like a perishable cobweb on an elephantine shelling sofa. Himself he positioned on its edge facing the Prussians, to sheath his Bagpiper, and got caught in a version of her agonizing struggle with gloves. Otto was clearly in pain and too agitated to pull the floppy bit of sheath
down over his red, swollen, hugely extended Bagpiper…. When at last he succeeded he forgot all about the order of events, hovered over her straightaway in the push up pose Janey Ann had accurately described, and that was the end of his admirable control. He was plunging, heaving and sweating, his contorted face was the glaring scarlet of his Bagpiper and of the Prussians uniforms….

45

In the third part of the novel we hear of Shan’s visit to the U.S.A. as India’s Commerce Minister. There she uses the language used by her grandfather while defending in the law-court the sole survivor of the Company Bagh bloodbath. He had pleaded that the ruling power’s law-courts had condemned men to death for following its own example – for the crime of putting their words to your music: The following conversation between Nurullah and Eknath brings out the similarity between what her grandfather had said and what she said in New York as the Commerce Minister:

‘I heard The Minister explain the Asia Doctrine in New York. I don’t know how the European capitals she toured reacted to it but in New York it could have been anarchy she was proposing. One unfriendly analyst called it a hemispheric policy that looked hostile to the west and would disrupt time-
honoured patterns of Commerce World-wide.’

‘And what did the Commerce Minister say to that. ‘She said it’s your wisdom we’ve turned to for an autonomous hemisphere. We are putting our words to your music. We’re so disappointed, she said, that you are reacting like the mighty Matternich did to your Monroe doctrine. The man sitting in the row in front of me got a chuckle out of that. He told the man sitting next to him she’d have outwitted Matternich any day.  

This parallelism highlights the fact that the Americans abhor no less than the British the tendency of Indians to follow their example. And thus, their attitude is same as that of the British. This attitude can in no way be justified. Hence the lesser breeds are no lesser than those who consider them so.

Thus, we see that Nayantara Sahgal’s novels bear witness to her talent for story-telling. She employs the technique of parallelism and contrast to tell her stories effectively. While reading her novels, the reader does not fail to notice her ability to weld her material into a coherent, organic whole. In this she is greatly helped by the symbols she artistically employs in her novels. She chooses a large as well as a small canvas to paint the picture of life in her novels. The reader moves from one page to another with his interest in the story ever on
the increase. Vivid and impressive descriptions of places and persons lend an extra charm to her novels. It is with great skill that she integrates the political and personal worlds in most of her novels. Her lively presentation of exciting situations in her novels does not let the reader’s attention flag.
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