CHAPTER – II
Nayantara Sahgal: The Making of a Writer

A writer will have his own vision which may be peculiar and unique. His perspective changes according to his experience and understanding of the world in which he lives. National ethos may also influence the writer and his perception. The ethos of a nation is inextricably interwoven with its cultural heritage. The various patterns of life adopted by a people in response to the demands of a particular environment natural, social or political form the culture of those people. It encompasses art, literature and religion and gradually evolves itself into an invisible yet powerful influence on the later generations gratefully acknowledging it as a bequeathed legacy. A nation will have its roots in its cultural heritage which ultimately forms the matrix of the nation’s aesthetics. A writer is apt to be more sensitive to the disturbing day to day happenings and changes occurring around him, and tends to react and respond intensely. He creates a world of his own depending upon the angle from which he views the world. The works, more often than not, contain and reflect the experience and vision of their creator. As Joseph Conrad has put it, “in truth every novelist must begin by creating for himself a world, great or little, in which he can honestly believe. This world cannot be made otherwise than in his own image” (Web, http).

With a vision of her own, Nayantara Sahgal is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English novelist and an established political columnist. Born in Allahabad on May 10, 1927, she is the second of three daughters of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. She spent her childhood in Anand Bhawan at Allahabad with her parents, her maternal uncle, Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru and her cousin Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Her father Ranjit Sitaram Pandit was a lawyer by profession, but he left
practice to join the Indian National Movement and later died of a serious illness soon after his release from jail in 1944. After her schooling at Mussorie, she went along her sister to America and did her B.A. in History from Wellesley College, Massachusetts, in 1947. She married Gautam Sahgal in 1949, a young man working in a British Company, and had three children born of him. It was a love marriage that eventually failed and she divorced Gautam in 1967. In 1979, she married again an I.C.S. officer, Mangat Rai, after many years of living together. Nayantara saw politics from inside and was immensely influenced by the loving, sacrificing, refined and bold personalities of her father, mother and Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru. She gives a memorable account of childhood impressions on her tender mind in her two autobiographies. Her first literary work was in fact her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, published in 1954. Subsequently her first novel, *A Time to be Happy*, appeared in 1957. Since then she became consistently engaged in writing novels and political columns in newspapers.

Sahgal’s literary canon consists of eight novels, two autobiographies, some non-fictional works, and several articles and short stories published in leading newspaper magazines. The latest among her novels *Rich Like Us* (1985) and *Plans for Departure* (1986) have reinforced her position as one of the foremost Indian novelists on the contemporary scene. Her talent can be seen in full bloom in her *Rich Like Us* for which she received the prestigious British honour, the *Sinclair Prize* for Fiction. And, subsequently she was also honoured with a *Sahitya Akademi Award* for the same novel. For her *Plans for Departure* too, she was awarded the *Commonwealth Writer’s Prize* for Eurasia region. Her last publication is the novel, *The Mistaken Identity* (1988), which too has been widely acclaimed by the critics.
Nayantara Sahgal was born and brought up in a family of patriots and self-sacrificing freedom-fighters. Her parents, her maternal uncle and her maternal grandfather were all men of letters and wealthy debonair. But they shed all pomp and show and devoted themselves (with Mahatma Gandhi) to the struggle for freedom of India. She had seen the turmoil both before and after the Independence in 1947. In her novels, on the one hand, she exposes the politicians and their maddening hunger for power, and on the other hand, she highlights the sincere freedom fighter’s sacrifices for their motherland. She says, “The heroes in my novels were patterned on pre-independence examples and the villains on contemporary personalities” (Sahgal, Not ‘a time to be happy’ yet! 16). In all her works, there is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. Her works are marked with a humanistic vision, and in her writings, as Jasbir Jain has also observed “there is a genuine concern for human values and human-beings. She has observed behaviour and reactions of people’s mild humour and depiction of changing social conditions in contemporary India are quite interesting” (Jasbir, the Aesthetics of Morality 9).

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the most significant woman novelists of contemporary India. She seems to have terminated all the inaugural gains attained by writers who had made an effort to identity the political and the individual levels of life in the field of prose writing before her. Nayantara Sahgal is an ingenious writer with a vision of her own.

Sahgal has written on varied and diverse subjects extending from real life biographical accounts written with the fervor to legendary invented life stories of personalities. She explains the close connection of her writings with her life in her work A Voice for Freedom:
I grew up during the National Movement. My parents went to jail repeatedly during our fight for freedom. My father died as a result of his last imprisonment released too late to be cured of the serious illness he had contracted in jail. My uncle became our first Prime Minister, I was born and brought up within the atmosphere and hopes and ideals of the Congress Party. Its leaders were familiar to me. Our home was their meeting place and many decisions momentous as India were taken in it. I became a novelist and a political journalist, and all my writings, fiction and non-fiction, has been about contemporary India. (5)

Nayantara Sahgal grew up in an atmosphere where the political conditions of India made an exclusive and inseparable impression on her personal life. She had spent her childhood at Anand Bhawan in Allahabad with her parents, her uncle Jawaharlal Nehru and Cousin Indira Gandhi. Her family was deeply involved in the freedom struggle for India. Her mother and father actively participated in the Gandhian Satyagrah Movement and agitation against the British regime. The turbulent national obsession with the freedom struggle that reached its zenith in the thirties had left an indelible impression on the mind of young Nayantara Sahgal. She herself expresses it in her autobiographical work Prison and Chocolate cake:

Our growing up was India’s growing up into political maturity - a different kind of political maturity from any that the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, passion and peace. The influence of these strange politics wove into our lives... (20)

The parents of Nayantara took keen interest in India’s freedom struggle. Many a time they were arrested and sent to jail. It was a
common sight for the Pundit girls. The separation of the Pundit girls from their parents impacted their subconscious mind considerably. These periods of separation required them to look to their own resources and eke out their existence with courage and conviction.

It was very fortunate that prison terms of their parents did not disturb their growing up. They made every effort to provide the daughters with a normal healthy childhood along with some kind of continuity in education. The presence of an older generation at Anand Bhawan, their family home, provided them a sense of security along with fulfilling their basic needs. Nayantara recalls with love and affection the order-loving Nanima and the story-telling sessions of their widowed aunt Bibima. She also recalls lovingly the memory of childhood games she shared with their mother’s sister Krishna. Jasbir Jain writes about the role that Jawaharlal Nehru played in the early life of Nayantara Sahgal and her sisters:

Their uncle, Jawaharlal, was not only an uncontested hero but also a boisterous play-mate who spent hours with them, singing old songs and organizing new games, giving the go by to grownup authority and discipline, inhabiting for a while their noisy, exuberant world. This was not all — all around them political and moral ideas were being discussed and formulated and the girls a part of it. If it was Nehru’s idealism which has influenced her political stance, it is her own father’s gentleness and courage which has influenced her moral stance. (Jain, Nayantara Sahgal 12)

Her family parents, cousins, uncles and aunts were active members of the freedom struggle. The freedom struggle was the center of attraction for the Indian political scene. The girls shared the political and moral
values that were discussed and developed around them. The over optimistic views of Nehru guided her political views but her father’s politeness and courage motivated her ethical behavior. Her personality was molded by a multi-faceted impact of the values of her father and uncle.

She remembers Ranjit Pandit, her father, as a generous and understanding father who never allowed the inhibiting forces of society to enter his family life. He often offered his companionship to his daughters, treating them as equals and explaining to them the complexities of contemporary political values. Nayantara was deeply attached to him and her happiness and unhappiness was synonymous with her father. He was a great scholar of Sanskrit and translated Rajtarangini into English. Nayantara herself has written in her autobiographical work, Prison and Chocolate Cake, about her father in very loving terms:

> Our father combined the most extraordinary qualities. He was a Sanskrit scholar who had translated a number of the classics into English, and a gifted linguist speaking several European and Indian languages. But he was far from having the scholar’s retiring temperament. He was gay and laughter-loving, with a passion for both western and Indian music. (30)

He was a person eminently unsuited to a political career. In a free country he would have not chosen to take part in political life, his contribution would have been of a different nature. But owing to the demanding circumstances, he had to take part in the politics of India to get it free from the clutches of the English. Nayantara was deeply attached to him and felt that in some inexplicable way her happiness and unhappiness were deeply bound up with her father. She resembles him in
physical structure as well as temperament. She was interested in serious
education, and had an innate understanding of history accompanied
by a fascination for wide-open space. All these she inherited from her
father. He was gentle and courageous and strongly believed in the
freedom of human beings. Nayantara developed a fanciful liking for these
principles. She held them dear to the core and upheld them in her as well.
It is the nature of human beings to recall the past and childhood with a
sense of nostalgia. Nayantara also remembers her childhood as a time of
freedom, as she writes in her work From Fear Set Free:

I was conscious of being continually stretched in mind
and spirit, of being encouraged to be venture some, of
doing the daring rather than the timid thing, of taking
risks than playing safe, and I was keenly aware of the
joy of being myself like every other person a unique
human being. (53)

Nayantara spent her childhood in her grandparents’ home, which
was not far away from Anand Bhawan in the city of Allahabad. She
frequently visited Anand Bhawan to meet her Bibima and Nanima. Since
she was a child of rich heritage, she enjoyed all the facilities which were
provided to her by her well-to-do parents. She played with her sisters-
Chandrakala and Rita. She was immensely fond of her father and
remembers the time when she walked with her father and her sisters:

Every morning Lekha and I walked with Papu in the
garden, one on either side of him, holding a finger. In
the evening, we would listen impatiently for the sound
of his horse’s hoofs clattering on the smooth path to the
house. Papu rode every day and on his return we would
wait with slices of sugared bread and carrot sticks to
give to his horse. (Sahgal, Prison and Chocolate
Cake 28)
The parents of Nayantara had to go to prison now and then, by virtue of being freedom fighters. Yet they were conscious and anxious about the education of their children. She, along with her sisters, was sent to a convent for formal schooling where she found the experience an unsatisfactory one and was conscious of the difference between the values of her home and her school. Later, she with her sisters was sent to Woodstock, Mussourie. This institute was managed by American missionaries and was a renowned school. In this institute, she found the atmosphere more congenial, free and suited to her temperament. The ban on political activities of the students in India was responsible for the decision of their parents to send Nayantara and Lekha to America for higher studies. Their mother was worried about their safety. Her father and uncle felt that this was the only possible course to ensure that their lives were not embittered by the political situation at home.

Nayantara herself writes about the decision of her parents regarding her departure to America in her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake*:

*Some things will always remain a mystery to me. One of these is the perpetual question: how did Mummie and Papu had the courage to send us to America in 1943? Many people had journeyed abroad before the war and many more were to go after, but few went as we did, at our age, from a peaceful country on a troop ship, at the height of the war. I have grown up since then, married, and had children of my own: Yet the older I grow, the less able I am to answer the question. I am quite certain that I could never send my children away from home so confidently and fearlessly in such circumstances.*

*(Ibidem 3)*
While the parents of Nayantara and Lekha were still in jail, they sailed unescorted for America on a troopship on May 14, 1943. In America, Nayantara joined Wellesley College, Massachusetts. She completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in History in 1947. In America, she learnt to her dismay that people knew very little about India and that whatever little they knew was not even remotely connected with the truth. Education in America widened her sphere of understanding, courage and independence - subjects in which her knowledge was initiated by her father back home. Nayantara spent four years at Wellesley, but throughout these years, India was constantly there with her. She took with her the tradition of discipline, love, loyalty, courage and mental strength. She herself writes in *This Time of Fulfillment*:

>I took it all with me, the loyalties, the way of life I had known, I found that they grew and blossomed and found new ways of expressing themselves in what was, for the first in my experience, a free country. (15)

In America, Nayantara and her sister were not only considered two teenage girls but the nieces of Nehru also. In this way, they acquired the unique status of being unofficial ambassadors of India. Their time at college was incredibly full of happiness and they made many friends. During the vacations, they had opportunities to travel and meet various American celebrities, many of whom were the friends of the family. Despite their excitement over their new surroundings and their breathless awe at the majestic city of New York, they were still homesick. The thought of Papu and Mummie, and Mamu, in prison was a perpetual shadow across their enjoyment. They made an earnest pact to make the most of their opportunities and to be genuine and sparkling pieces of India as Nehru had called them. During their early weeks in New York,
they were showered with kindness by people whom they had never met before, and some of them whose names they had heard but whom they had never dreamed that they would have the good fortune to meet. The people showed special affection and kindness because they were nieces of Nehru. Both the sisters were quite good at studies. They had the opportunities to know many distinguished citizens of America. With them they also formed friendship which lasted even after their return to India. In many ways, their experience was remarkable and pleasant. In 1944, Nayantara suffered a deep lasting shock due to the distressing death of her father. It had a traumatic effect on Nayantara as she was most attached to her father. She realized the full impact of his death when she returned to India in 1947. India was not India without him, and the future stretched ahead utterly bleak and blank before her. Her mother was in Russia as the ambassador of India, and the country itself riddled with several problems. Her home appeared to her a haunted place. The only familiar abode was Jawaharlal’s home, which was oddly comforting because the activity there was familiar and presented a world of recognizable values. It was the time when Nayantara felt more comfortable in the world of the past than the present and she cherished romantic dreams of marrying a professor of History and spending her life doing research into some remote period of Indian History. But luck had something different in store for her. A turning point came in her life at this very juncture. She was swept off her feet by an ambitious young man, named Gautam Sahgal, working in a British firm. Gautam was not connected with politics even remotely.

Nayantara found his world strangely attractive as it provided her stability and ordinariness. It was a kind of life which she had not so far felt or experienced. Sometimes, she expressed her doubts about the
differences in their background, but Gautam Sahgal overcame these doubts with an assurance that together they would build a new world. She was swayed by romantic love to accept his proposal. They both consented to it and immediately got married at Allahabad. Nayantara’s marriage was not the first to be unconventional one in her family. The marriage of her mother and aunts had likewise been unconventional as had been that of her cousin Indira’s to Feroze Gandhi. But in all these prior marriages there had been similarity of background, which was nowhere to be found in her case. The Gandhian philosophy and values, which she had learnt to cherish, had no place in her new life with Gautam Sahgal. One can feel the underlying tension and her efforts to save her marriage in her second autobiographical work, *From Fear Set Free*, which she dedicated to Gautam. After all Gautam was her choice and she was still trying to make a success of her marriage. Gautam’s world was entirely new and strange to her. She herself wrote that it was a shift of values and change from the atmosphere of a political crusade to one of commerce.

There were many incidents when she felt alienated and neglected, and the reader becomes aware of Gautam’s indifference and callousness to issues which involved her emotionally. She did not get on well in her married life with Gautam. Looking back in 1976, she very candidly analyzed her marriage, which unsettled her emotionally:

> *For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality. A man’s ego and ambitions, I learned, must be served first. In case of conflict, the man’s ego and desires must prevail… I was uneasy and restless adjusting to the demands of a personality and an environment whose goals and texture were different from anything I had known or been comfortable with.*

(∗Ibidem 15∗)
This maladjusted marriage terminated in a divorce in 1967. Nayantara regrets about her unfortunate marriage and feels that she made a mistake by marrying when she was not prepared or mature enough to handle the difficulties that manifest in such a relation. She should have waited for a later date to take plunge in it and patiently decided when she was capable enough to deal with the marital status. However, it is customary in India to have girls marry young. The subject of marriage becomes the central theme in her works. In her book, A Time to be Happy, the episode dealing with Kusum’s sorrow represents her own sad plight and the union of Sanad and Kusum represents her secret desire to reunite, a wishful projection of her own desires. In her novel This Time of Morning Rashmi felt smothered and suffocated in her marriage to a businessman Dalip. The union broke up finally and they separated. In her novel The Day in Shadow, the central character, an intelligent sensitive and knowledgeable woman is a writer and a freelance journalist. Perforce, she gets compelled to enter into a divorce settlement which was harsh and cruel like Nayantara experienced in her real life.

Nayantara fortunately met E.N. Mangat Rai, an accomplished bureaucrat with whom she could have a great deal and with whom an amicable communication was possible. She loved and desired this companionship with full conviction. She explains the relationship herself, “what followed was not an affair but a revolution, a self-discovery that life had to be lived more fully in order to be meaningful” (Bhatnagar 46). After living together for many years she married him in 1979. Talking about her second marriage, Nayantara says:
Neither of us was at all interested in getting married. But in 1979, the Janata Government appointed me ambassador to Italy and that forced me to marry… Fundamentally there is not much difference between living together and getting married. If you are loyal to each other, it does not matter. If there is loyalty and trust, one does not need marriage. (Dutta and Baweja 17)

In post-colonial India, Nayantara was not satisfied with her political milieu and policies of the elected government. All these years she was critical of the manner in which the newly acquired democracy in India was being defined and understood in a suffocating style. Nevertheless, she got and temperamentally acclimatized to it during the period after Nehru. Nayantara herself came to feel the pulse of apathy, indifference and later the hostility of the government when her novel A Situation in New Delhi was not allowed to be published under Indira Gandhi’s Emergency regime. Among the Indian intellectuals who fought for the restoration of democracy and human rights in India at this critical juncture in the country’s history, Nayantara Sahgal was perhaps the most frank and ardent advocate of the political and civil rights of the people. Nayantara resigned from the executive committee of the Authors Guild of India as well as from the Sahitya Akademi Advisory Board as a measure of protest against the disinclination of the Board to pass a resolution condemning press-censorship and imprisonment without trial. She wrote a stern letter to the government body exposing its double standard. This letter was accompanied also by her resignation letter. She quoted in A Voice for Freedom:
We are not faced with a political issue in a normal political situation. We are faced with a dictatorship which has ruthlessly demonstrated its policies and intentions... The emergency has made it clear, if any clarity was needed, what kind of government we are dealing with in its naked disregard of democratic functioning and human rights... I hope this situation will change but no change is brought about a service population and certainly not by the educated elite that falls in line with every excess a dictatorship commits. I am very certain that I can be no party to any of this. (13)

Nayantara Sahgal felt a queer suppression by the subdued criticism as a result of which she could not contradict the discontinuation of civil liberties in India. She left for America where she carried on her uncompromising crusade in association with lick-minded people through the press. She exploited all available means to reveal the misleading face of Indian democracy. She addressed university seminars, gave radio interviews, T.V. Symposia and wrote articles for magazines and newspapers. Her collection of selected speeches, articles, and interviews during this interim period was published at a later date in A Voice for Freedom(1977). Though collected with great pains, this frank, true, articulate, and predictive collection is slated, at times, to become malicious. Nayantara has justly dedicated it to the gullible Indians who were humiliated, tortured and put behind bars during the period of Emergency.

Indian politics was deeply ingrained in her personality, in her emotional and intellectual make up. Right since the last episodes of the Indian struggle for independence, she remained a vigilant observer of
the incidents and scenario rife with disintegrating social, political, cultural and ethical values in the Mid-Seventies. She has scrutinized the modern tendencies and situations to the minutest realistic details in her novels while prophesying at the same time the futuristic drifts of political actions. A *Time to be Happy* (1958) by her presents the preceding as well as the succeeding political environment in independent India. It deals with, in the main, how there existed a rat race for power grabbing even among those who shared the same political ideals. *This Time of Morning* (1965) deals with unethical power-politics, with how men of ideals and vision were pushed to the rear whereas those who were immoral and callous in attitude occupied the center-stage of power. In dealing with the power structure of the secretariat and the parliament, it is akin to C.P. Snow’s *Corridors of Power* (1963). In her *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), we come across an astounded nation stuck between the clash of two generations—one decaying and the other perplexed. It displays the clash of personalities with no consequential ideas and issues left in the Post-Nehru era. Conspicuous in it is the element of modernity along with the marked change in social, moral and behavioral standards. Titular ‘storm’ of the novel is the symbolic storm which fuses political commotion after the partition of Punjab with the conjugal trauma of men and women in real life. While her *The Day in Shadow* (1969) integrates the traditional and modern trends of life and living, it renders the pulls and pressures of public life as well as the agony and ecstasy of the private lives of men and women of consequence in modern India.*Rich like US* (1985) presents the scenario about a month ahead of the repressive and suppressive Emergency when:
Nothing anywhere made sense, since in a moral universe either everything must have a meaning or nothing. Memory dragged me backwards to reports I had read with monetary shock and then deliberately pushed away because they were too terrible to remember. (Sahgal 29-30)

In A Situation in New Delhi (1988), Sahgal has depicted the political tides before and after the emergency invoked by the supremo of the then government in power. Ruthless abetment of force has been shown gaining ground to the neglect of the silent suffering of the masses. Akin to her mother Pt. Vijay Laxmi’s autobiographical The Scope of Happiness (1979), political disorientation is its dominant theme. Sahgal’s Mistaken Identity (1988) underscores her significant development as a novelist, its story revolving around the tumultuous period of Indian history supported by the illustration of realistic events, feelings and counter-feelings surrounded the country and other parts of the world in the first three decades of the 20th century.

Very recently, Nayantara Sahgal has penned another novel Lesser Breeds having a historical background. Its canvas is filled with the incidents of the Indian struggle for freedom. Her ninth novel, it is thinly veiled account of freedom movement as she experienced it from the vantage point of powerful Nehru household in Allahabad. It is aimed at an audience so far removed from her original milieu that she has to make it in to a fable.

Sahgal’s belief is that “everything around the writer is material for a novel. That material comes from real life” and that “one generally draws on one’s own experience or someone else’s” (John 13). She has the firm faith in a creative person’s commitment to reveal the specter of the future besides having his own illusion and finding ways from
and out of it. This is the task that the artist has to perform, that he has to illuminate the way. Sahgal herself has confessed, “I think it is the artist’s job, and the writer’s job particularly… to show the way”(A Voice for Freedom 80).
WORKS CITED


