Chapter V

Summation

Nayantara Sahgal’s literary work spans nearly five decades with her first work *Prison and Chocolate Cake* appearing in 1954 and her first novel *A Time to Be Happy* in 1958. She has gone on to write three autobiographies covering a period from 1943 to 1965, but often moving backwards to capture memories of her childhood, her parents, her grandparents and the early years of Gandhian India. These volumes are *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), *From Fear Set Free* (1962) and *Relationship: Exacts from a correspondence* (1994).

The first two have a sense of immediacy as they are a sorting out of her own experiences soon after they had happened, while the letters in the third volume record her emotional self-struggling with conventional social impositions and breaking free as she moves towards redefinitions of freedom and morality.

Three of her early novels, *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *The Day in Shadow* (1971), are autobiographical as far as they build on her own emotional experience and conflicts. But they are also political as they capture the political happenings and environment of the newly
independent India, the changing face of bureaucracy, the shifting value structures and loyalties. Her fifth novel, A Situation in New Delhi (1971), marks a break with autobiography and concerns itself with the nature of power and political governance. The new leadership is obsessed with the idea of progress and development and has abounded all concern for the human being. The novel captures the unrest prevalent in the country during the 60s and 70s because of economic disparities, social inequalities and the non-involvement of the upper classes in nation-building activities.

The later three novels published between 1985 and 1988 are markedly different from her earlier work as they move away from immediate political events to the early decades of the twentieth century. Of these Rich Like Us begins with the national Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975 and moves back through the personal histories of Rose and Sonali to the nineteenth century, while the other two locate themselves in the early decades of the twentieth century. Plans For Departure is concerned with the years 1912 to 1918 and Mistaken identity with 1929-1932 and the novels focus on interpreting the complex cultural formations of these periods within a historical framework.
Sahgal’s work needs to be placed simultaneously in several different traditions for it has an inbuilt multiplicity. There is first the tradition of the national political discourse; second, that of Indian writing in English; third, of women’s writing in India, and fourth of the fictional tradition as developed in the west. It also needs to be placed amongst the category of work which is part of a decolonising process and generically it projects a new kind of biographical history of the nation which has its own structures.

Sahgal’s work has critiqued and evaluated from different perspectives—as a feminist, as a political writer, as a writer of social documentaries, and as an advocate of Gandhian ideologies. But none of these frames are entirely adequate or sufficient unto themselves. There is a need to place these issues within the larger context of history and the processes of decolonization. Though she resists being placed in categories like colonial or postcolonial, it is not possible to avoid the use of such terms as she has lived through these stages and has captured the political scene from the 40s to the 70s with an uncanny understanding of the undercurrents, of the processes at work and of the men and women who have been at the helm of affairs.
The political novel engages itself with contemporary moves and policies and explores the human elements in political decisions. But the moment there is a search for continuity, it acquires a historical dimension. And any retrospective analysis is more dispassionate, even if more anguished than a contemporary one. Nations and people remain rooted in their past. From this point of view her three novels of the 80s are most significant as each one of them traverses the past in order to blame other, and perhaps not too difficult to dismantle myths, it is difficult to accept one’s failures. But if one is honest, there is no escape from facing the reality.

Sahgal’s middle novels reflect India’s retreat from Gandhian thought and if the spirit of the Mahatma survives anywhere “it is certainly not India. The late sixties mark a post-Nehruvian era and Indira Gandhi’s rise to power. During these years Sahgal wrote a weekly column for the Indian Express group of papers (the Sunday edition went by the name of the Sunday Standard) and was clearly anti-Establishment in her criticism of the suppression of democratic rights, and the indifference to the human being vis-à-vis the notion of progress so evident in politics.
Gandhian ideology seeks the self’s maturity to the level of self-transcendence. There is no place in it for any sense of personal ego. Kailas (Morning) and Sardar Sahib (Shadow) are willing to sacrifice even their personal reputation for the nation. They posit a different idea of leadership. But all along there is an erosion in these values and a rapid taking over of all moral space by ideas of development, with the result that the task of nation-building is neglected. The pattern of governance in free India begins to duplicate colonial power structures.

Sahgal’s work on Indira Gandhi’s rise to power a historical note, is an analysis of this impulse to power, while her own book *Voice of Freedom* (a collection of lectures she delivered in American universities during the Emergency), is about the need for an open society which provides space for individual developments. Dissent is a strong requirement in a democracy for it acts both as a corrective and a warning. It allows space for perspective of the other. The Emergency is resented primarily on this count, that it put down dissent, it wished to project the state as the only authority—and a monolithic one at that.

Hidden behind this need for dissent is the critiquing of the Indian democracy, which is different from western
democracies because of its colonial experience, low level of economic development and high level of illiteracy. The intellectual-and the political leader in such a situation have an additional responsibility and need to have a highly developed sense of conscience. Mere symbols just were not enough. Nation building required a spirit of dedication higher than the self. This issue is taken up at great length in Rich Like Us where the dictatorial approach of the new generation of leaders is criticized.

It is this idea of communication which is also very central to the man-woman relationship, which is, in its essence a power relationship. Women have been subjugated both by traditional culture and social attitudes. Feminine virtue is defined through adherence to norms, suppression of female sexuality, and at times separation between the body and the mind. Child bearing may continue even in a loveless marriage. And women who are perceived merely as possessions, are denied their selfhood, freedom of will and mind, in fact their humanity.

Almost all Sahgal’s novels are women-centred. Mistaken Identity is the only novel to work through a male consciousness. Sahgal describes it as a novel with two heroines but without a hero. And these women placed in different situations, facing
different kinds of oppression, realise that there is no social recognition for the early novel’s, marital conflict arises out of the division of the couple along ideological lines—with one partner being westernised and the other engaged in the freedom struggle but in the later novels it is a more marked difference of attitude.

It was the eighteenth century writers, the inventors of the 'novel' in its present day form, who strongly felt that the novel and social purpose should go hand in hand with each other. This was because of the fact that they were all primarily journalists, and so, socially conscious. About the function of a Indian writer, Nayantara Sahgal writes:

To be relevant to his culture a writer's imagination... has to be able to create the men and women and situations of the Indian environment and the Indian reality. If a writer can do this, make people feel with him, stimulate thinking, and inspire action because of what he writes, then he is fulfilling his function... (The Statesman, May, 9, 1971)

Sahgal’s novels, thus, present the problem situations of Indian politics and provide solutions to political confrontations, social evils, and individual conflicts thus
educating the readers politically, socially and psychologically. She recommends a system of freedom and liberalism with a strong urge for humanistic concern which alone makes social change meaningful. Her work places before us a view of the politico-social ethos of independent India in its passage through a phase of transitoriness of values on being exposed for the first time to both freedom and power. Her novels, in general and her *Storm in Chandigarh* in particular drive home the need for moral values in politics and the need for meaningful action and an awakening from a state of apathy in order to arrive at an understanding of the self and its relation to society thus fulfilling the requirements of a novel as has been pointed out by Joan Rockwell:

Fiction is not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also paradoxically an important element in social change. It plays a large part in the ... conduct of politics and in general gives symbols and modes of life... in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms, values, and personal and interpersonal behaviour. (88)
Though the major contribution of Nayantara Sahgal to the art of fiction in Indo-English Writing is the political novel, the uniqueness of her contribution lies in her widening of the scope of the political novel by making politics sound as an all pervasive influence, affecting life at all levels. In her novels, politics and personal life of individuals are interwined, interrelated, and equated wherein the political conditions depicted go beyond a particular political event to envelop the totally of politics. For a writer whose major concern is freedom- individual freedom and related values — it is natural that she deals many kinds of threats to freedom.

In Storm in Chandigarh Sahgal is certain that violence ensues from selfish and narrow attitudes of which the consequences are petty agitations, bandhs and satyagrahas — all distorted versions of Gandhism for they lack the purity and spirit of sacrifice that marked Gandhian resistance. At the same time, she stresses the fact that violence spreads and takes the toll of the people and society because of the apathy and inaction of a majority of people especially the middle class intellectuals at the personal and societal levels.

Storm in Chandigarh is a novel wherein there is a perfect integration of the political and personal themes both of which
meet in the person of Vishal Dubey who commits himself to the value of the inviolability of the human self thereby asserting the idea of freedom as a 'habit of mind or a way of life.'

As is indicative of the title, the politic, the political turmoil over Chandigarh provides the backdrop against which the novel's action at the individual level is set thus intertwining the social and political worlds which make an impact on die individual consciousness. Following the linguistic bifurcation of the truncated, post-partition Punjab in the early sixties Chandigarh remains with the centre, though it has become the capital for both the newly emerged States of Hindi-speaking Haryana and the Punjabi-speaking Punjab. The partition leads to an intensification of their quarrels over boundaries, water and electricity and makes them indulge in violence that rocks the newly constructed nation. Nayantara Sahgal chooses to render artistically the confrontation between the stormy Chief Minister of Punjab, Gyan Singh and the altruistic Chief Minister of Harayana, Harpal Singh. Gyan threatens to demonstrate the strength of his demand by launching a crippling strike ailing strike at Bhakra that covers both the regions which is a kind of blackmail. Vishal Dubey who has the "gift for tackling a problem at the human level" (8) is entrusted with the work of saving the already boiling situation from exploding.
The choice of the newly built capital Chandigarh as the locale for the novel is quite significant as it symbolises an emerging new order in the post-independence India. Designed by Le Corbusier, with its stark architecture, it also signifies an alien world that—disturbs the thoughts of Vishal Dubey on his arrival at the city.

The stormy activity in which Chandigarh is caught up politically at the very opening of the novel is reflected at the personal level, in the turbulent marital life of Saroj and Inder, and Mara and Jit. In fact, the political issue in question is symptomatic of "a socially pervasive violence of attitude that appears more seductively in the marriages." Vishal Dubey, a passive spectator in the beginning is caught unaware in the 'storms' on both the planes because of his 'sense of involvement.' He is instrumental in controlling the raging storms at both the levels.

As Vishal goes to the scene of violence, what he encounters is not mount up tension but a state of paralysis—nobody makes an attempt to quell the violence. People are inert and indifferent, waiting for the violence to spread and engulf them. The government's policy of 'wait and watch' is suggestive of passivity and inaction. While ideologically-oriented people like
Harpal sits paralyzed, active but aggressive and unscrupulous people like Gyan degrade the Satyagrahas and mass movements to the level of political blackmailing. Since passive good can never successfully destroy active evil Vishal manages to convince Harpal to take a stand against inaction and initiates him into action which leads to the putting an end to the strike but not before Harpal is shot dead by Gyan's supporters just which the Home Minister, a relic of the Gandhian past in modern Indian history dies, thus marking the final "retreat from Gandhian ideals in the contemporary political situation..." (Storm 81)

At the individual level it is Vishal who motivates Saroj, the victim of male tyranny, to come out of the state of inaction and paralysis. He says that life was bigger than any system:

Life could remould or break the system that lacked righteousness and reason. It was life's precious obligation to rebel, and humanity's right to be free, to choose from the best light it could see, not necessarily the long-accepted light

(Storm 191)
The marriage between Saroj and Inder is not built upon love, patience, and truth which to Inder are superfluous things. He can never treat his wife as a friend with whom he can "be naked in spirit" (p. 69). With a man like him who applies a double moral code, her openness spells only disaster. He is obsessed with her pre-marital lapse and uses chastity as a weapon to humiliate her. Her act, he feels, has no place "in an order that clearly demarcated the roles of men and women" (Storm 96). Saroj, on her part, does not consider herself guilty of any lapse. She is warmly and wholly involved in her marriage to Inder but he persists in raking up the past making Saroj beat against his "numbness like a bird against a windowpane trapped in a futile frenzy" (Storm 97). Saroj "wants to be recognised as an individual and wants to build up a relationship on that basis whereas Inder treats her merely as a wife – a possession not a person,"(Storm 101) only as one part of an enterprise. He successfully tramples on her personality. She becomes a victim to emotional violence, thus ceasing to be the New woman.

Saroj is like Harpal in her passive acceptance, in her changing to moments of response and communication just to save her marriage and in her adopting of withdrawal tactics. Both Saroj and Harpal are representatives of that majority of the people who are instrumental in letting violence spread and
engulf them and the society at the personal and societal levels just because of their apathy—which quality, unfortunately they tend to equate with 'tolerance' the noble quality preached by Mahatma Gandhi. Nayantara Sahgal by way of offering a remedy to this paralysis at the personal and societal levels makes both Saroj and Harpal act at the right point. Saroj walks out of the home that has ceased to be a home at the end of the novel while Harpal takes an active stand to quell the strike launched by Gyan Singh. But the society for whose sake Harpal’s life is sacrificed remains unmoved by the sacrifice, apathetic as ever.

Nayantara Sahgal writes novels that mirror faithfully the contemporary Indian political scene. It is in this sense, that her novels are to be classed in the genre of political novel. She seeks to present in each of her novels a consistent point of view and moves from satire and irony to a positive constructive vision. She analyses and interprets the political themes/events with an intelligent and perceptive mind and reads the individual responses of the characters to these events with the unusual sensitivity of a mature artist.

Sahgal’s Rich Like Us which echoes the dreadful sights of the emergency and the past, is the climax of the series since the first novel A Time to be Happy. Like Plans for Departure,
her recent novel *Mistaken Identity* registers an important stage in her growth as a novelist and branches out in a new direction. Possibly, the writer is attempting to understand a country and its cultural-political life, the happenings and events, by adopting the technique of biography. The identity of India and a true Indian is to be searched and therefore like in *Rich Like Us* and *Plans for Departure*, in the novel under consideration. *Mistaken Identity*, the multiple vision and point of view of a political biography is at work. It is a narration of history-in-the-making with the advantage of hindsight. In choosing a context of vital significance and possibility, Sahgal assumes an ambitious position which has the danger of desertion as well as the possibility of synthesis and the novel is strikingly different from anything she has written before.

In *Mistaken Identity*, the story moves forwards and backwards in the stream of consciousness method as Bhushan Singh is in jail, facing the charges of attempts to overthrow the British rule. Though Bhushan has nothing to do with the revolution, his identity is mistaken and he is to undergo the trial and torments.

His stay in the jail brings him into close contact with Yusuf, Comrade Sen and Iyer and the true Gandhian Bhaiji. The
comrades are greatly charmed by the Russian soil and the theory of revolution. The dethronement of the Tsars in Russia and the event of getting rid of the Caliph in 1925 have great impact on the socio-political and religious makeup of the people in India. The people in Turkey, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha, had dissolved the religious orders in 1926. They replaced the Sharia with a western civil code, a new constitution, and the use of European numerals in place of Arab numerals was adopted. The new situation in Turkey meant that there will be no Pope of Islam, and such changes did have direct or indirect relationship with Bhushan's Hindu-Muslim unity theory.

Bhaiji, the ardent follower of Gandhi, holds the juxtaposing position as against Yusuf and his comrades. Though their fight is unanimously against the British rule, they seem to have difference of attitudes. The worth and fame of Gandhi is presented in a new critical scrutiny, "the comrades make him sound like a comma in the middle of a sentence which would read a hell of a lot faster without it." (30) Sahgal, as an accomplished and mature writer, brings out the faded shades of Gandhism. The set of opposites help the growth of the novel and allow the characters to a better understanding of their selves. Yusuf is a machine addict. He loves the perfume of factory smoke and grease-oil. He says, "The future depends on machine"
contrary to his views, Bhaiji favours the use of a few machines only, such as sewing machines that won't corrupt the economy or the moral libre. He is for cottage industries; his vision of freedom is "the dawn of an era washed clean of drink and lust." (Identity 81)

Between Yusuf and Bhaiji, Bhushan maintains the equal-distant stand because he is from a country called Vijaygarh and not India. The comrades and Bhaiji form a study circle with Bhushan as their topic. It is through the discussions between Bhushan and his jail-mates that the narrative of this novel progresses. The flow of language is the flow of relationships. Though none is able to understand the puzzle why Bhushan is in jail, they share ideas and ideologies.

Though Yusuf proves later to be the guide and the 'compass' Bushan Singh, because Yusuf lets him realize the 'harmony,' it is the Gandhian Bhaiji whose death leads him to meet his first love Razia. Bhaiji used to spin and send the thread to the fallen sisters, the prostitutes. Bhaiji once moved to the red-light area and tried to persuade the prostitutes to stop their immoral business. He called them his 'fallen sisters' and though they did not accept his theory, they accepted to spin 'takli' and promised to take part in the national movement.
It is at the time of claiming the dead body of Bhaiji that Bushan is assigned to deal with the superior of the fallen sister. This superior of the fallen sister is none other than Razia, his teacher, who taught him the lesson of 'harmony.'

Bushan, in his Hindu-Muslim madness, feels in the talk of comrades, a soviet style muezzin's cry echoing. The jail is the central situation, and the story grows in Bushan's interaction with his cell-mates, his fancy and in his observations. In spite of all the recurring references to Lahore conspiracy case and Gandhiji’s fruitless effort to save Bhagat Singh and his friends from hanging, to Jatin Das who wanted to die for the country, to the conditions in Andaman's jail and the speeches of Motilal Nehru and Amar Nath Das to save the convicts, this novel remains the life story of Bushan and what is made of the life of Bushan in the given situation. And thus, the characters build lives outside the time and the political setting of the novel. This provides the novel its artistic beauty and literary charm.

Sahgal presents this novel as a political document of the period when concept of respectability mattered differently. Bhaiji said, "every Indian must get used to going to jail. Let it become our national profession." (80) We experience here the beauty of details, richly used by the author. The language is
charming and absorbing, phrases like 'cooling anger' have refreshing artistic fictional charm. Herein, the emotionalized experiences, with the political events and situations, get the natural flow. In this well-crafted book, Sahgal writes a fine story, wherein the characters and situations not only amuse but also make the reader familiar with a fascinating period.

The genre of the political novel appears to have accentuated and intonated with natural integration of the new lyrical dimension of fictional art that Sahgal embraces at this stage. We have here, as in earlier novels, a documentary picturization of contemporary political reality, but what is remarkable, rather unmistakable in Sahgal's art is that it combines artistic portraits of life with the political history of contemporary India. History seems to speak the language of politics as it does in most of her novels, but at the same time distinct emotive life-pattern appears to be emerging as a powerful fictional force, in the conscious artistry, the texture and the contour of the world that she weaves.

One is tempted to remark that the story of the period becomes fascinating in *Mistaken Identity*, not simply because of the political potential of the period but for the artistic reason of powerful story-telling also.
The documentary part of the political novel appears to be in clash with the artistic fictional effects that Nayantara Sahgal looks for in this novel. She seems to have discovered an artistic urge for fresher themes of life.

Sahgal appears to be inspired by an irresistible desire for assertion of fictional art and its aesthetic appeal as well, which is why in *Mistaken Identity*, some sort of artistic unity of impression is realized both in terms of content and form. The story of the contemporary political life is narrated through the experiences of the protagonist Bhushan Singh cell-mates in the prison, Yusuf, Bhaiji, Comrade Sen, Iyer and Bhushan’s love Sylla and others. These characters are allowed by the artist to live outside the recognizable point of the political period in which they live. They have an assigned role or recreating the political situation and ethos of the period, through their interaction and confrontation with situation conflicts they are in. At the same time, they breather and live outside the prescribed political framework; they add wit, humour, wisdom and love, to the wholesome emotive world and its effect that the novelist aims at and achieves.

Sahgal presents successfully an India with all its Religious and social contradictions, and depicts the political situation
with all the ulterior undercurrents and succeeds in presenting the ideal and the real working against each other, the real undermining the ideal and the ideal resisting erosion. Thus *Mistaken Identity* shows her marked maturing development as a political novelist.

The Indian novel has emerged not simply as a pure literary exercise, but as an artistic response to the socio-political situation existing in the country. For, the factors that shaped and moulded the growth of the Indian novel, since the mid-nineteenth century, arose as much from the political and social problems of a colonized country as from indigenous narrative tradition of ancient culture.

The struggle for Independence in India was not merely a political one, but an all pervasive experience that become a part of the life of almost all the sensitive and enlightened Indians. Parallel to this struggle for political freedom was a social struggle—a fight against superstition, casteism, poverty, illiteracy, and many other social evils that were eating into the vitals of Indian society. The Socio-political movement that had caught the imagination of the entire nation also inspired the Indian novelists in English who rightly realised that novel too had a vital role to play in it.
Sahgal wonders, therefore, if the Indian novelists in English, right from the end of the 1920, started turning away from the romantic phase focusing their attention on contemporary problems, motivated by the political and social questions arising from the changed historical situation. They began to conceive the relationship of man and his surroundings in a new and realistic manner, and they did not break away from the central concern of man’s quest for self-realisation, they modified it by longer emphasising only its spiritual nature.

As other mid-nineteenth fiction writers, Nayantara Sahgal also has committed herself to socio-political problems of the age, but her treatment of political issues is not because of her hailing from a political family but her keen interest in her own society and her own country. And also she belongs to no political party.