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The Foreground of Their Fiction
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Politics, history and autobiography intermingle in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal and establish her eminence as a political novelist endowed with a rare foresight. There is indeed an inseparable link between Nayantara Sahgal's life and the stuff of her fiction. Born of parents who were intimately connected with Indian politics and brought up at a time when India was facing a historic political crisis, her involvement in politics and public affairs was simply inevitable. Her own words in the preface to her first autobiography, *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, bear this out:

There are THREE of us - Lekha, older and Rita, younger than myself. We grew up at a time, when India was the stage for a great political drama and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performance we have seen. This is the story of its influence on our lives (vii).

Nayantara Sahgal, the second of three daughters of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the first Ambassador of India to the U.S.S.R., was born on
May 10, 1927, in Allahabad. She spent her childhood and adolescence in and around Anand Bhavan with her parents, her maternal uncle Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and her cousin Mrs. Indira Gandhi who was senior to her by ten years. She grew up in an atmosphere of an Indian joint family enjoying all its advantages of loving elders, story-telling grandmothers and loyal servants. Her father Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, a lawyer by profession, gave up his flourishing practice to join the Indian National Movement. Nayantara used to call her father affectionately 'Papu'. To quote the words of Hilda Pontes:

Papu was loved by his daughter-writer; in her estimation he was a man with abundant love and understanding, refinement and restraint, besides having a healthy zest for life, both physical and intellectual (1985, 1).

The happiest moments of Nayantara's childhood were often interrupted by the prevalent fury of Indian politics. Jail-sentences for parents and consequent separation from them were so frequent in the family that children had learnt to take them in their stride:

Our lives were as normal as our parents could make them, but since they themselves had chosen to play a part in that drama we could never live quite as other children did (PCC 15)
Nayantara Pandit was sent to a convent for formal schooling. Later, she was sent along with her sister Lekha and Rita to Woodstock, a co-educational institution managed by American missionaries at Mussorie. Nayantara herself says in her "Testament of an Indo-Anglian Writer":

I am an Indian -- by blood, nationality, upbringing and conviction -- and western by virtue of my English medium education. Starting with the local convent in Allahabad, I went on to five years at an American school, Woodstock at Mussorie, followed after a gap, of four years at Wellesley College in the United States (10.4 Dec. 1972:17).

At the age of eighteen, after her schooling at Mussorie, Nayantara was sent to America for higher studies along with her elder sister Lekha as her father and uncle felt that that was the only possible course to see that their lives were not embittered by the political situation at home. On May 14, 1943, the two sisters sailed for America unescorted in a troop-ship while their parents were still in jail. In America their guardians were Nehru's publisher Richard Walsh, his distinguished wife Pearl Buck and Mrs. John Gunther. Education in America widened the intellectual horizons of the Pandit daughters considerably. Nayantara joined
the B.A. Degree course in History at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, in 1943. Her father R.S. Pandit died of some serious illness the following year soon after his release from prison and so at the end of 1944, Vijayalakshmi Pandit and her youngest daughter Rita went to America to join Nayantara and Lekha. Nayantara's four years in America were filled with delightful associations. According to Jasbir Jain a well-known critic of Nayantara Sahgal, the joy Nayantara felt in America was self-conscious:

In America they were not just two teenage girls on their way to college but the nieces of Nehru and in this capacity they became unofficial ambassadors of the country. The time at college was incredibly full and happy and they endeavoured to make full use of it (1994 a, 4).

During the vacations, the Pandit sisters travelled widely and met a number of American celebrities such as Paul Robson, Pearl S. Buck, Helen Keller and Dorothy Norman. Nayantara returned home in 1947 on completion of her higher education abroad. Her mother Vijayalakshmi Pandit, refusing to play the role of a typical Indian widow, readily accepted the difficult mission of a diplomat as free India's first Ambassador to the U.S.S.R.
With her diplomat mother being continually away from India, the fatherless Nayantara lived for sometime in Delhi with her uncle Jawaharlal Nehru, then Prime Minister of India. While Vijayalakshmi Pandit was being shifted in her diplomatic posts abroad as Indian Ambassador in Moscow, Washington and London, the twenty-year-old Nayantara met Gautam Sahgal, an attractive Punjabi business executive working for a flourishing British firm, at Delhi's Gymkhana Club, which was the frequent haunt of several westernised Indians and well-to-do foreigners of the time and fell deeply in love with him. Nevertheless, despite her romantic obsession, the young Nayantara had deep intellectual and academic preoccupations too. Nayantara confesses to her secret obsession, almost with a sense of ironic humour:

I had every intention of marrying a history professor and spending my life doing research into some remote period of Indian history (FFSF 14).

The young Nayantara was so greatly fascinated by the young man that she wished to marry him, though their cultural backgrounds were entirely different, counting merely on the assurance of Gautam that together they
could build a new world for themselves. Eventually, in 1949, she did marry Gautam "to whom Gandhi was just a name" (FFSF 21). Hilda Pontes records this event: "On January 2, 1949, Nayantara married Gautam Sahgal, Branch Manager of Messrs. Bird & Co, a British firm. The marriage ceremonies were held at Anand Bhavan" (1985, 10). The values Nayantara had learned to cherish during her childhood had no place in her new life and she was finding it increasingly difficult to adjust to the world of Gautam Sahgal, filled with such anglophiles who could neither understand nor appreciate Gandhian values and hence were violent critics of Gandhism. To Jasbir Jain, "Young and uncertain and full of hope, Nayantara little realised that their worlds were not only different but ill-matched" (1994 a, 5). In course of time, Nayantara became depressed and unhappy as she noticed that Gautam Sahgal could neither understand nor communicate with her. In the intervening years of her marriage, "Nayantara seemed content to live the life of an affectionate wife and mother to their three children Nonika, Ranjit and Gita -- all three now well-settled in life" (Pontes 1985, 10). Nayantara's autobiography From Fear Set Free deals with her meeting and marrying Gautam Sahgal and the birth of her three children. Eventually, in 1967, Nayantara
opted for a divorce which in many respects was very difficult and painful, mainly triggered off by the harsh terms of the divorce settlement. The agony she as an Indian felt soon after her divorce finds expression in her highly autobiographical novel, *The Day in Shadow* in which the heroine Simrit, just like Nayantara, opts to dissolve a marriage of seventeen years and in consequence faces many hardships after her divorce as society does not easily recognise a woman's identity apart from that of her husband.

Meanwhile, Nayantara met E.Nirmal Mangat Rai, working in the Indian Civil Service as Chief-Secretary to the Government of Punjab in whom she found an immense personal empathy and understanding. Their friendship continued for many years and they eventually married in 1979. Neither Nayantara nor Rai believed in marriage as an institution. Nayantara's scepticism on marriage is quite significant. In her own words, the decision over her second marriage was not without qualms as

> Neither of us were 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 being married. If you are loyal to each other it does not matter. If there is
loyalty and trust, one does not need marriage (qtd. in Dutt May 1986:17).

Nayantara's letters to Mangat Rai in the late 1960's were collected and published in 1994 by Kali for Women, under the title, Relationship: Extracts from a Correspondence. In her introduction to this book Nayantara says, "Most of these are love letters, read, absorbed, and possessed repeatedly and lingeringly when they were received" (1994, VI). That the decision of divorce had been hard on the part of Nayantara can be inferred from her letter to Bunchi (Mangat Rai) dated April 26, 1965. Talking of her divorce with Gautam Sahgal she observes:

We were so much together in love, in anxiety, in all our discussions of our problems. How easily and ruthlessly these things are decided in America through divorce. Why do we linger and ponder and discuss endlessly all the possibilities of hurt to all the people concerned? What could be simpler than that I should come to you, wherever you are, and we should make a clean break and start afresh. Only how nearly impossible that would be! (Relationship 115).

In his article "It is Love All the Way" - a review of the book Relationship Geetan Batra comments, "The letters are poignant, full of love and care for each
other's dilemmas and the desire to be together" (5 June 1994: XVI).

After her divorce, Nayantara indulged even more freely in writing fiction and contributing articles on current items as a political columnist to various newspapers and journals. She became a Member of the National Executive of the People's Union for Civil Liberties and played an active role in several national and international organisations. She was awarded Fellowships from Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Washington, and the National Humanities Centre, North Carolina. She was also appointed writer-in-residence twice at the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, U.S.A. first in 1973 and again in 1977. Like a recluse, at present she lives away from the heat and dust of New Delhi in Dehra Dun in her mother's house overlooking a lovely range of mountains.

Sahgal has been active as a political columnist and creative writer for more than four decades and has so far eight novels and two autobiographies to her credit besides a book on history Freedom Movement in India (1970) and a political treatise, Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power (1978) which is an appraisal of Indian
politics and the ups and downs of the Indian National Congress party under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. Her political work *Indira Gandhi's Emergency and Style* (1977) is a study of Mrs. Gandhi's years in power 1966-'77. She has contributed more than 300 articles to newspapers and journals including *The Times of India, The Sunday Standard, The Illustrated Weekly of India, Span, The Hindustan Times, The Indian and Foreign Review* etc. Discussing her as a political commentator Shyam M. Asnani observes:

As a political columnist her newspaper articles are characterised by their topicality, simplicity, and boldness. She makes a point of keeping in touch with the latest political controversies and her writings are often presented in the best tradition of western liberal journalism (1985, 108).

Sahgal's earliest literary effort was in poetry though she never rose up as a poet. She first wrote the poem "The Awakening in August" in 1952. It was followed by "You Are Not Alone", a poem written for her uncle (Mamu) in 1953 and her next and last poem "Afternoon Magic" also appeared in 1953 in *The Atlantic Monthly Supplement*. 


Sahgal embarked on a literary career writing first her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), while she was only twenty-seven years old, dwelling primarily on the influence of Jawaharlal Nehru and her father Ranjit Pandit on her as a child and an adolescent. Her second autobiography *From Fear Set Free*, published in 1962, is a sequel to the first one discussing her marriage, her delivery and nurture of children, touching also on her love and admiration for her uncle Nehru whom she refers to as 'Mamu', who was a tremendous source of inspiration, support and strength during the critical years of her first marriage. Both her autobiographies are important for any reader interested in her fiction as her creative art and personal experience are very much intertwined. Lakshmi Sinha says, "Both the autobiographies become important because they provide the basis for a better understanding of the novelist and her novels" (1993, 43).

Sahgal's career as a novelist began with her first novel *A Time To Be Happy* in 1958, which enacts the drama of India's struggle for Independence and presents the shifting spectrum of the socio-political life of the country during the turbulent period through a
depiction of upper middle class Indians like the Shivpals and the Sahais. Her second novel *This Time of Morning* (1965) is set in post-independent India. The life depicted in this novel is,

the life shot through and through with politics, all over politics and sex, an eating, drinking, merry-making, hugging, kissing, dancing and copulating world, with conferences, committees, public-meetings, get-togethers, discussions, seminars, processions, demonstrations, protests, boycotts, interspersed with parties and club socials (Asnani 16.1-2 Jan. - June 1973: 43).

Her next novel *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) portrays the actual situation in the 1960's of the separation of Punjab and Haryana with Chandigarh as their common capital which each claims exclusively as its own. Against this violent political situation in the bifurcated states of Punjab are depicted the intricate, often absolutely incomprehensible mutual relations of the four persons, who, both in love and marriage, turn out to be aliens to one another. Her fourth novel *The Day in Shadow* (1971) deals with an Indian woman's struggle to liberate herself from the clutches of an unhappy marriage through divorce. Being the most personal of all her novels, the autobiographical element is most conspicuous in this work written in
1970 at New Delhi, where she arrived from Bombay to settle soon after her divorce in 1967. The novel also tells the story of Delhi on the threshold of other momentous changes and presents a new breed of politicians far removed from everything Gandhi stood for. Sahgal's next novel *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) portrays in a "rather superficial manner the aftermath of Nehru's death, the Naxalite Movement, and student unrest" (Naik 1982, 240). Sahgal's fearless criticism of Indira Gandhi Government's policy prior to 1977 led to a ban on the publication in India of *A Situation in New Delhi*. Eventhough she had completed writing it in 1975, its publication took place only in 1977 as a London Magazine Edition. After a gap of eight years since the publication of her earlier novel *A Situation in New Delhi*, Sahgal's most famous and award-winning novel *Rich Like Us* using the Emergency as a backdrop was published in 1985. For this novel she had received the most prestigious Sinclair Prize for fiction in 1985 and for the same novel she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in 1987. Hilda Pontes points out, "It [*Rich Like Us*] is her first novel written outside India. She had won a Fellowship of Woodrow Wilson International Centre, Washington, D.C. for writing it" (1985, 14). *Rich Like Us*, having for its
setting Delhi a month after the declaration of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975, deals realistically with the infringements of politics on the personal lives of people. O.P. Mathur says:

It is in Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us that the realities of this brief nightmarish period have been translated into human terms without any of their repulsiveness being lost (1993b, 71).

After Rich Like Us (1985), there is a marked transformation in the choice of Sahgal's subject matter and setting. Sahgal says in an interview:

The Emergency [1975-'77] was a turning point for me personally and therefore fictionally, Rich Like Us was set against a background of the emergency, that event released me from the 'chronology' I was engaged in writing novels with the contemporary political scene as a setting -- because dictatorship was the end of that particular road, a dead end, in a sense (qtd. in Sinha 1993, 50-51).

Sahgal's latest novels Plans for Departure (1987) and Mistaken Identity (1988) can at best be described as historical but not political. In an interview V. Mohini had with the novelist, the latter offers the following explanation for the change in her writing:

The decline and the despair and the gathering
clouds after freedom, the building-up of the totalitarianism which finally led to the climax of Emergency was the vision of the later novels upto *Rich Like Us*. That was a sort of chronological development, at every stage reflecting the hopes and fears of Indians. Then came Emergency and that was the worst that could happen. It was there, I took off in time and my next novel was set in 1914 and the latest in 1929. With these novels the moral vision is not bound by a chronology of events (25.1 (1990): 60).

Sahgal's seventh novel *Plans for Departure* (1986) won the 1987 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Eurasia Region. In this novel a significant part of history is presented as the experience of an emancipated Danish spinster Miss Anna Hansen who is used effectively both as a commentator and as the protagonist. It is through Anna Hansen's central consciousness in the novel, that we are given a glimpse into the private lives of the two British gentlemen Henry Brewster and Marlowe Croft. Though Henry is sincere, liberal and compassionate, his marital life is embittered and frustrated because his wife Stella has not been responsive enough to his love and warmth. The marital relationship between Marlowe Croft and his wife Lulu is also strained due to lack of mutual understanding. As opposed to these discordant couples, Anna and Nicholas are a happy couple living in perfect
harmony. While analysing this novel S. Varalakshmi observes:

While the author's primary concern continues to be the problem faced by women, in *Plans for Departure* I think she has convincingly universalised the woman's socio-personal predicament (1993 c, 113).

In this novel, one may venture to say, Sahgal takes a long-range shot of the Pre-First World War scene.

The year 1988 saw the publication of another novel *Mistaken Identity* which dwells on the critical socio-political events of the British India of the 1930s. The narrator protagonist Bhushan Singh (Jumbo) the son of the Raja of Vijaygarh, is suspected of treason, arrested and thrown into jail, while on journey home in North India after long months of travel abroad. As Bhushan becomes friendly with the other political prisoners, he tells stories from his own colourful past. As the case of Bhushan continues to get adjourned in the court, Sahgal finds time to look on his cell-mates and the world around them. The portrayal of Bhushan's mother too deserves attention as she represents an orthodox society marrying at the age of five. She is brought to her husband's home at thirteen and has to wait for nine
years to be blessed with a son. The novel closes with her rebellion as she elopes with a communist lover, her son's erstwhile comrade in prison.

Nayantara Sahgal, the novelist, tried her hand in writing short stories too. For her it was a new venture. Her short stories have not been collected and published. The following is the list of some of them that have been published in Indian and Foreign Magazines:


3. The Relationship, *Cosmopolitan*.


5. The Naxalite, *Hemisphere*.


   and

Sahgal's literary achievement lies in her ability to transmute the disparate social, historical and political forces of her time into the organic structures of novels. Her novels not only deal with the political theme of India passing through a transitional period since Independence but also with the dilemmas and problems, joys and fulfilments, plights and happiness of her female protagonists. Her novels are also preoccupied with the modern Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realisation. They effectively present the life of the richer section of the Indian society with its hypocrisy and shallow values.

P.V. Akilandam, the popular Tamil writer known to the literary world by his pseudonym Akilon, a contemporary of Nayantara Sahgal was born on June 27, 1922 in Perungalur, a hamlet near Pudukottai. He was the son of M.Vaithilingam and his second wife Amirthammal who was just thirteen at the time of her marriage. Traditionally, his ancestors were accountants in the village treasury, as Akilon's own father was, for a time. Subsequently the writer's father was absorbed in the government "as a village officer who served in the princely state of Pudukottai in the Departments of
Forest, Excise and Revenue" (EV15). Vaithilingam's loyalty to the king and also to the British rulers was total. Akilon was born at "the zenith of his father's prosperity" (EV 21) and instantly became the pet of the family. He was brought up for ten years in style in keeping with his father's sumptuous income. Akilon himself says, "I was a pet child at birth and an affluent one at that" (EV 22). S.Venkataraman observes, "As Akilon's father's income began to rise phenomenally, his youth was spent in luxury for some years" (1977, 10). Vaithilingam was transferred to various places around Pudukottai and Akilon had the rich experience of mingling with the rustic folks from different walks of life. While at Thekatoor, Akilon had the rare opportunity of gaining the acquaintance of some convicts who were in the custody of his father. Akilon's father nourished dreams of his son going to London and becoming a Collector in the Indian Civil Service. "On the very day of my birth my father resolved to send me to London to qualify for the I.C.S. as Collector" (EV 24).

Akilon initially went to a primary school in his village. In his autobiography Eluttum Valkkaiyum (Letters and Life) Akilon describes how ceremoniously
he was initiated into life in the elementary school:

I can recall the scene of my initiation at school. I was taken to the primary school at Panaiyapatti in the decorated car of my father's friend in a procession to the accompaniment of music of a band-set (24).

However, all this pomp and show in his life were short-lived as his father was suddenly dismissed from service for dereliction of duty, on the ground that he had gone on French Leave to attend the funeral of a close relative. A revengeful clerk had played an active role in ensuring the dismissal of Akilon's father. Hence the family left Thekatoor and settled in Karur, the native place of Akilon's mother. It was while doing his fifth standard that Akilon joined the freedom struggle. Along with his class-mates he picketed a toddy shop and protested against the British rulers idolized so much by his father during his life time:

My father though, had a profound devotion and loyalty to the government of the princely state of Pudukottai and the British rulers... I am just the opposite of my father in this. I was drawn to the national freedom movement even during my Karur days as a child. I joined a group of students picketing and protesting against running a toddy shop while I was in the fourth or fifth standard. I never failed to attend any public meeting held in connection with the struggle for national freedom (EV 44 & 76-77).
On Akilon's completion of his fifth standard in Karur, his father shifted his family to Pudukkotai to give his son the best education possible. Akilon became a resident student in the Middle School, then known as Branch College, on the financial support of Krishnamatchari, a close friend of his father. Having lost his job, his father tried to eke out a living now by practising as a Siddha doctor in the village Ponnamaravathi, twenty miles away from Pudukkotai. Akilon was a keen scholar and read with absorbing interest the writings of Charles Dickens, Washington Irving, D.H.Lawrence, Oliver Goldsmith, Longfellow and Wordsworth:

Before I completed my eleventh standard, at school I had become acquainted with parts of the novels of Charles Dickens, the short stories of Washington Irving, essays of Oliver Goldsmith and D.H.Lawrence, and poems of Longfellow (EV 71).

Akilon read with great interest the prose works of Thiru.Vi.Ka. and the poems of Bharathiar:

I have gained an excellent pair of eyes in Tamil -- one is the creation of Thiru.Vi.Ka. and the other is that of Bharathi. Both these writers are geniuses who provided me with a new perception in my youth (EV 74).
Akilon's father passed away at the age of fifty-eight due to poverty, when Akilon was studying S.S.L.C. Akilon tells about his father's death:

He was then fifty-seven or fifty-eight.... He waged an endless war with poverty. He was one who never shrank from embarking on a tireless struggle, yet he couldn't win the battle against poverty. It was penury which killed him (EV 82).

On his death-bed he advised young Akilon never to accept bribes in life. Akilon then became acquainted with poverty so early in life that he wrote as a tenth class pupil, his first short story "Avan Elai" ("He was poor") 1939. When he showed it to his Tamil teacher at school, the latter modified the title as "Mitiyal Matital" ("Dying of Poverty") and published it in the School Quarterly Magazine. Akilon felt that "Avan Elai" ("He was Poor") was the proper title for the story as it originated from the shock he had in learning all on a sudden the truth that he was poor" (EV 84). This story was much appreciated by the staff as well as the students of the school. Now Akilon began writing short stories for various journals like Tai Natu (Mother Country), Anikalan (Ornament), Intira, and Inpam (Bliss).
Soon Akilon became an activist in the youth wing of the Indian National Congress. He was the Secretary of the local unit which was responsible for starting the August Revolt of 1942 at the Pudukottai Mannar College (King's College). On August 15th of the same year, he organised a protest against the arrest of Gandhi and other leaders. This is an episode from his life echoed in his novel *Pavai Vilakku* (The Maiden Lamp) where Tanikacalam, the protagonist, organises a similar token strike in connection with the August Revolt.

Akilon worked as a co-editor for the journal *Inpam* (Bliss) for some period in 1941. His career as a writer began in 1942 with his contribution of short stories to *Kalki* under the pseudonym 'Akilon'. He worked as a clerk in the Registrar's Offices at Perungalur, Pudukottai, Ponnamaravathi and Keeranoor for short periods and also at the Public Welfare Department for some years. He married his cousin Pattammal in April, 1944, and, as a Gandhian idealist he wore khaddar for his wedding.

Soon after his marriage, Akilon was appointed as sorter in the Railway Mail Service and he underwent training in Tirunelveli for four months. His first
appointment was at Tenkasi from where he had to travel in the train -- northwards up to Virudhunagar and southwards up to Trivandrum -- sorting out mails. Tenkasi, with its sylvan scenic beauty adjacent to the waterfalls at Courtallam, greatly inspired Akilon to write short stories like "Mēkacāncāram" ("Wandering Clouds") and "Tuṇaivi" ("The Consort") for the journal Kalaimakal. According to S. Venkataraman:

While he [Akilon] was working in Tenkasi, the scenic beauty of Tenkasi and the Courtallam Hills provided him with a great inspiration for creativity (1977, 13).

His keen observation of people on his way to Trivandrum prompted him to write short stories like "Ẽn?" ("Why?") , "Nilavinile" ("In the Moon") and "Taņiyumā?" ("Will it Subside?"). Travel by train stimulated his creative mind and spurred it on to write stories. Soon he began writing novels and serials for journals.

Akilon wrote his first novella Mankiya Nilavu (The Dull Moon) in 1944 against the setting of Perungalur, his native village. The protagonist of this novella is a Gandhian who sacrifices his love for the national
cause. The novella was published as Inpa Niñaivu (The Happy Recall) in 1949. While he was at Tenkasi he wrote his maiden novel Pen (The Woman) as a competition entry for the journal Kalaimakal in 1945. The novel won the Kalaimakal Narayanaswami Iyer Award in 1946. It was serialised in the journal and later on published by the same as a book in 1947. Jegasirpian says:

Akilon was a born-genius who won a prize of one thousand rupees for his wonderful novel Pen which he wrote for the journal Kalaimakal at the age of twenty-three. Could it have been possible for him to win a prize like this at this age but for his inborn gift of letters? (qtd. in Ramalingam 1974, 43).

In the novel, Akilon voices his protest against his father's dream of making him an officer in the I.C.S. through the character of Santhanam who spurns the I.C.S. and all its comforts which included a rich wife, in order to join the struggle for freedom. The novel was translated into Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, and Malayalam. It was also acclaimed by the Department of Tamil Development of the Government of Tamil Nadu.

Akilon published the first collection of his short stories Caktivel (The Spear of Sakthi) in 1946. Sakthi is the popular female deity of power and terror in the
Tamil Pantheon. Akilên's collection comprised of twenty-two short stories written during the years 1941 to 1945. As Akilên himself acknowledges,

These are the short stories written at the dawn of my literary career from 1941 to 1945. These were the exploits of a novice during his apprenticeship in the sphere of Tamil Literature (1961, Preface).

His second collection of short stories Nilavinile (In the Moon) was published in 1948, presenting some scenes and events from India prior to her independence:

Some of the stories in this collection deal with certain historical events of the pre-Independence India, presented with a flavour of dreams and ideals of Akilên's youth (Venkataraman 1974, 6).

Akilên's health declined as he started busying himself with his profession on the one hand and his literary efforts on the other. In 1953 despite being cautioned by his doctor not to write as he was then suffering from typhoid, he carried on with his serial to the journal Kalaimakal, Nencin Alaikal (The Waves of the Heart) which won the first prize for the best novel for 1953–1954 from the Department of Tamil Development of the Government of Tamil Nadu.
As Akiln felt he could not do justice to his job and his literary effort simultaneously, he resigned his job as a sorter of mail in 1958 to become a full-time writer:

Having won a few prizes and enormous readership Akiln gave up his postal sorter's job and migrated to Madras city to become full-time writer and sell stories (Datta 1987, 24).

In all, Akiln has to his credit, nineteen full-length novels, sixteen volumes of short stories, four books for children, four plays for the stage, four books of essays and one autobiography Eluttum Valkkaiyum (Letters and Life). Of the nineteen novels, three are historical novels set in the ancient Tamil Kingdom period of Cholas and Pandyas:

The novel Venkaiyin Maintan [The Son of the Tiger] drew its theme from some of the events that took place during the period of the chola empire, which dominated the political scene in South India between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Some of the events that took place during the Pandya and the Vijayanagar periods formed the background for the novels Kayal Vili [The Fish-Eyed Princess] and Verri Tirunakar [The Triumphant Holy City] (Varadharajan 1988, 280).

Venkaiyin Maintan (The Son of the Tiger) is his first historical novel which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in
1963. As S. Venkataraman points out, "Akiløn's novel Venkaiyin Maintan won Rs.5000/- as prize money from the Sahitya Akademi of the Government of India" (1974, 33). Later, the novel was dramatised by a troupe of Shivaji Ganesan, a popular actor. Another of his historical novels Kayal Vili (The Fish-Eyed Princess) was adjudged the best novel of 1964-65 and won the prize of Rs.1000/- from the Department of Tamil Development of the Government of Tamil Nadu. The novel was also broadcast as a radio-play and was filmed as Maturai Pëtta Cuntara Pëntian (The Handsome Pandiyän who Redeemed Madurai). Akiløn's third historical novel Verri Tirunakar (The Triumphant Holy City) was published in 1966 and dramatised and broadcast first as a radio-play before it was presented on the stage. The other novels of Akiløn deal with the social problems of the common man in Tamil Nadu before and after India's Independence, most of which are imbued with the Gandhian ideals. The following is the list of his major socio-political novels:

1. Peñ (The Woman) 1947
2. Inpa Ninäivu (The Happy Recall) 1949
3. Tunaivi (The Consort) 1951.
5. Cantippu (The Meeting) 1952
7. Avaluku (To Her) 1953 Co-authored by Akilon, Selvan, Sona and R.V.
8. Valvu Enke (Whither is Life?) 1957.
16. Vānamā Pumiya? (Heaven or Earth?) 1983.

His novel Enke Pokiro? serialised from July 1971 to March 1973 in Kalaimakal which "won Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar Memorial Award of Rs.10,000/- was the proud first recipient of the award given to the best literary product during the years 1971-74" (Venkataraman 1977, 18). Akilon's social novel Cittirap Pavai won Bharathiya Jnanpith Award of one lakh rupees meant for the best literary effort of India in 1975. It was the first Tamil work to win the prestigious award in a period of about eleven years since its inception. It has been translated into English and seven other Indian
languages and also recently telecast as a serialized play. Akilon was also honoured with the Soviet-Land Nehru Award for 1978. His book meant for children Kannana Kannan (Kannan, the Pupil of the Eye) won the Tamil Academy Prize for 1963. His novel Pavai Vilakku was produced as a film and his Valvu Enke? was made into a film entitled as Kulamakal Ratai (Radhai, the Daughter of Tradition). Having visited Malaysia twice, Akilon could transform his first-hand knowledge of the plight of the Indian Tamil labourers in the rubber plantations of Malaysia living under the British owners into a social novel Palmarak Katthinile in 1973 which received the Jnanpith award:

Keeping Malaysia as the backdrop Akilon has written this novel centring round the fortunes of a Tamil family living there utilizing his first-hand knowledge of that country (Venkataraman 1977, 17).

Akilon's career as a short story writer covered a vast span of thirty-seven years, which saw the publication of one hundred and seventy-four of his short stories, now published in the following sixteen volumes:

1. Caktivel (The Spear of Sakthi)
2. Nilavinile (In The Moon)
3. An-Pen (Man-Woman)
4. Amaravati Karaienile (On the Shores of Amaravathi)
5. Cenkarumpu (The Red Sugar Cane)
6. Canti (Peace)
7. Vali Pirantatu (The Threshold Opened)
8. Minnuvatellam (All That Glitters)
9. Kulantai Cirittatu (The Child Smiled)
10. Cakotarar Anro? (Aren't They Brothers?)
11. Oru Velai Coru (One-Time Meal)
12. Nellur Arici (The Rice of Nellur)
13. Yerimalai (The Volcano)
14. Cattia Avecam (Righteous Indignation)
15. Paciyum Ruciyum (Hunger and Taste)

and

16. Viaturalai (Freedom)

Of these volumes, "Caktivel, and Nilavinile received certificates of merit from the Department of Tamil Development of the Government of Tamil Nadu, which also honoured him with an award for his Yerimalai" (Venkataraman 1977, 17). Several of his short stories have been translated into English. Some have even been translated into German, Russian, Czechoslovakian and Polish. No other modern Tamil writer has won so many awards and prizes and been widely translated as Akilon.
Akilon was for a while engaged also in translating short stories and plays from other languages into Tamil. For instance, he translated and fictionalised into Tamil Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* under the title *Takam* (Thirst). He rendered into Tamil the French writer Maupassant's nine short stories as a collection *Mulu Nilavu* (The Full Moon) in 1955. He translated four short stories from English, Russian and German languages into Tamil and published them as a collection of short stories entitled *Elutatak Katai* (The Unwritten Story) in 1954. Akilon recorded the experience of his three visits to the former Soviet Union in *Nān Kanṭa Russia* (The Russia I Saw) (1980). In the preface to the book he writes:

In these three years -- 1973, '77, '79, -- I had been to Russia and toured around seven of its Republics out of the fifteen. When I visited it for the third time last year, Mr.K.Rajendren, editor of Kalki, requested me to write about my experiences of the tour in Kalki. His wish and my enthusiasm are the fundamental reasons for the creation of this book (1988, 3).

He visited Sri Lanka too to participate in a literary conference and utilized the trip to collect materials relating to the history of Sri Lanka with a view of writing *Venkaiyin Maintan* (The Son of the Tiger), a
historical romance:

In order to write Venkaiyin Maintan (The Son of The Tiger) I needed not only the history of Tamil Nadu but also that of Sri Lanka. Hence I toured extensively around Tamil Nadu and was keen on visiting Sri Lanka too.... My plan was to travel day and night in Sri Lanka for a period of about one week covering the major part of the island state (EV 328 - 329).

Akilon who became a full-fledged writer in 1958 associated himself in the making of movies based on his novels Pavai Vilakku and Valvu Enke?. However as a literary artist he found it extremely difficult to compromise with the views of film-producers and, once for all, put an end to the habit of translating his novels into celluloid versions. Writing about this experience in his autobiography Akilon says:

I was not then prepared to manipulate my writings in order to suit the whims of some of those film producers who desired to keep in touch with me (EV 335).

Meanwhile, Swarnalatha a close friend of Akilon belonging to Savitri Vidyasala, Trichy, came to live with him, having resigned her job as a teacher in order to participate wholly in his literary endeavours:

Nobody realised at that time that another woman
had entered my life, having resigned her job in the hope of assisting me in my literary enterprise. She had been a member of the teaching faculty at the Savitri Vidyasala, Trichy. Swarnalatha had not only been one of my intimate friends but a close companion to Pattamma, my wife (EV 335).

Akilon has immortalised this extra-ordinary woman through the character of Uma in Pāvai Vilakku. Akilon married Swarnalatha in course of time. Consequently, the condition of his living became quite precarious, the family having lost the only source of fixed income, namely, Akilon's job in the Postal Service. However, 'Fortune' again smiled on Akilon in 1965 in the form of a windfall of the plum job he was offered. He was appointed the Spoken Word Producer for the All India Radio, Madras, an event which eased his circumstances quite considerably.

Akilon was not only a talented writer of short stories, novels, plays and essays and an effective translator but also an eloquent and scholarly speaker who attended several Tamil conferences, seminars and public meetings. His work won the hearts of millions of Tamil readers in India and overseas. His short stories became subjects for analysis as early as the First World Tamil Conference of 1966 held in Kualalumpur, Malaysia.
The Madurai Kamaraj University discussed Akilon's works in 1974 in a four-day seminar which witnessed the presentation of a number of papers on Akilon and his works by several eminent scholars of the day. Akilon's novels and short stories are a veritable means of research for several treatises and theses in various universities till today. Akilon served the cause of Tamil in various capacities as the secretary of Trichy Tamil Writers' Association from 1954 to 1957, General Secretary of All India Tamil Writers' Association from 1961 to 1965, President of the Madras Tamil Writers' Association in 1967, Director of Tamil Writers' Co-operative Society in 1961 and member of the Sakitya Akademi Advisors Committee for Tamil in 1963. Thus Akilon gave himself heart and soul to the world of letters and literary criticisms of his day.

Having begun his writing career in 1938 at the tender age of sixteen, Akilon had a creative span of fifty years in the literary field during which he vastly enriched the corpus of Tamil literary world through his creative works. When he passed away on the 31st of January 1988, the Tamil literary world lost a great creative artist indeed.
Thus Nayantara Sahgal and Akilon belong almost to the same generation of Indians who witnessed the dawn of Indian Independence which saw the dominant influence of Gandhian ideals. The events and movements related to the Indian Freedom struggle, the turbulent years of the Second World War, the unseemly scramble for power in the India of the Post-Independence decades and the unsettling effects of social injustice and economic imbalance form the backdrop of most of their fiction. Both the novelists are preoccupied with socio-political problems of their respective societies in free India. As novelists preoccupied with a political vision, they have succeeded in delineating the political, psychological and personal turmoils of Indians in the India of the 'pre-' as well as the 'post-' Independence periods. The novelists' espousal of Gandhian ideals such as simplicity, sincerity, tolerance, truthfulness and non-violence in the private as well as the public spheres of life, finds unbridled expression in their works. On the whole, they both emerge as idealistic political commentators of their age and also, in a profound sense, humanists. They are also united in their plea for the advocacy of morality in marriage based on mutual trust, consideration, selflessness, magnanimity and candour of spirit. It is true that the social milieux to which they
belong are different. Sahgal's works present a vision of the upper stratum of Indian society having ample access to the seats of political power whereas Akilon's characters belong to the common run of the society of Tamil Nadu. Yet both these contemporary writers are eminently comparable.