Sahgal's latest novel, *Plans for Departure* is acknowledgedly a more satisfying novel than her 1985 Sinclair Prize-winning *Rich Like Us* which deals with the more recent Indian history and captures one of its convulsive moments. *Plans for Departure* goes back to the British India during the period when the First World War had begun to cast its shadow. Though the backdrop of the novel is Indian, its inner moral churnings are all rooted in the pre-1914 Europe. Of the nine important characters, only two are Indian. Of these two, Mitin is steeped in western mores. He is loyal to the Raj which has knighted him. Only Madhav Rao, photographer and chemist, is the native of Himapur. All the other characters enjoy social or political privileges. Yet they come to Himapur as fugitives from the western world. Mitin, the famous botanist, has fled the crowds to study the neurotic tendencies of celery. British District Magistrate, Henry Brewster, whose wife has forsaken him, has been exiled for having “suffered from philosophy, and attacks of ruling-class consciousness.”

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His superior thought it fit to put him out to pastures in some harmless place because of his "flawed reasoning" (p.71) until he "got back into the proper team spirit" (p.193). Marlowe Croft who has spent two months in prison is here "to break new spiritual ground" (p.48). Golden-haired Anna, a Danish feminist and student of Indian mythology is fleeing an all-too predictable engagement to an upper-class Londoner. Her "priority was life and freedom first" (p.62). She does not like to be a beloved wife and die without making much effort to live. "Here lies Anna," she thinks, "beloved wife, who died without having made much effort to live and nobody noticed the difference" (p.62).

Stella has nothing in common with her anti-imperialistic husband. She is a soldier's daughter, brought up on Mutiny legend and lore. She would whole-heartedly appreciate the enthusiastic executions after the Mutiny and the "blood sports" (p.41) of the planters. Her husband, Henry Brewster, believes that the British have no right to be on the Indian soil. Tormented by this self-doubt, he witnesses Khudiram's execution with uneasy conscience. His poignancy is in clear contrast to the poise Stella maintains throughout the proceedings. Henry feels he is the stranger from whom Stella needs protection. There is so much of temperamental incompatibility
between them that Stella does not know what he has meant by love. She cuckolds him and finally makes her plans for departure to start a new life with Robert Pryor. By the end of the novel the imperialist, anti-Indian adulterers marry and move into the Governor's house in Bombay, whereas the pro-Indian Henry, who still loves his wife, dies fighting at Somme.

These political renegades and moral misfits have assembled in the remote fictional town of Mispur. It has no social life. But its sylvan tranquillity may occasionally be punctuated by the distant thunders of terrorist bombings and the news of Khudiram's hanging. In this serene foothill district bordering Nepal, these fugitives act out their obsessions. The quirks and crotchets of these outcasts can be captured only by an outsider. Sahgal adroitly brings in Anna Hansen of Danish origin.

Bringing in an alien into the centre of action has become almost a convention in Nayantara Sahgal's novels. In this regard Ved Mehta says Sahgal "follows an independent path. She is an insider who decides to become an outsider."²

²Ved Mehta, Daddiyi, Portrait of India. Quoted from Time (Sept., 23, 1985).
Being a citizen of a peace-loving country, Anna sees both the imperialists and their subjects objectively. For a good part of the novel, events are seen through her eyes. Her perceptions become related to the loneliness of the Collector, Henry, who still loves his wife with a "searing constancy" (p.115). Even though she has deserted him, her memory is "superimposed like a flame across his consciousness" (p.96). Sometimes Anna's perceptions relate to the stubbornness of the missionary, Marlowe Croft. She sympathises with Tilak during his incarceration, and has none of the inhibitions the British suffer from.

In *Plains for Departure* Sahgal is back in the limelight as "a weaver of plots and a creator of characters rather than an evangelical political journalist looking for a cause in the magic lantern world of passing events." She is no longer a castigator of State power. Sahgal's concern for temperamental disparity between man and wife continues to dominate in this novel too. Henry, as Anna thinks, is "an enigmatic personality which gave an unusual twist to his domestic crisis," (p.76).

Even in nine months he fails to reconcile himself to Stella's desertion. He lacks even the toughness of the missionary, Marlowe. Hence Anna feels "he looks like the priest, and the beefy missionary Croft like an empire builder" (p.88). As Pryor says Henry "never did understand the ideology of rule" (p.206). He finds himself at odds with the imperial Raj. He advises the British to be friendly with the natives. Thereby he causes some cracks in the imperial mould of the British. His wife lacks "his easy manners" (p.88). The secluded Himapur has nothing to offer her. So she used to spend most of her time with the Pryors in Lucknow. Ultimately Stella and Robert Pryor make plans for life together. Henry has a frank discussion with them.

Man-woman relationships were often disrupted by temperamental differences in Nayantara Sahgal's earlier novels. But in her later novels there is an increasing political awareness among her women characters which affects their relationships with men. Devi, Shivraj's widowed sister in A Situation in New Delhi, turns down Michael's proposal for marriage because she feels committed to stand by the political fortunes of her brother. Sonali's relationship with Ravi Kachru in Rich Like Us falls through because of their conflicting attitudes to communism. With her finer sensibility,
Sonali cannot marry a person who can flout humanism. In
*Plans for Departure* there is a reversal of roles. Stella's
imperialistic attitude is at variance with the anti-imperialist
stance of Henry. Hence she plans to desert Henry
and marry Pryor, another imperialist. Henry, like Vishal
Dubey in *Storm in Chandigarh*, thinks that decent human
relations do not happen merely by luck or by chance. They
have to be cultivated with love and care. So he is ready
not only to ignore Stella's adultery but also to adopt her
child in case she is already pregnant. It is viewed by Stella
and Robert as a testimony to Henry's demented mind. Stella
who has consented to give Henry and Himapur a trial now be-
trays him by breaking this covenant. Their marriage ends
in disaster. Henry is left with the feeling that life on
earth has become "arid and pointless without Stella" (p.196).
It is a transcendental love. It needs not even the physical
presence of Stella before him. Just as a sceptic can be
struck by religious lightning and be transformed in a blind-
ing instance, great personal grief has given Henry Brewster's
experience a mystic touch. Anna feels that Henry "could be
one of the elect, earmarked for mystical experience and
another dimension of life" (p.77).
It would be inconsistent if the feminist Sahgal condemns Stella for planning her life with a man of her temperament. Henry himself has no spite against her. Like Sahgal, Henry believes that love between two people needs "the manure of common cause" (p.192).

The marriage of Crofts too falls through for its lack of "common cause." Marlowe Croft has a mesmerising self-assurance. He is dedicated to his mission of spreading the gospel of equality. His zeal for his cause brings him into clash with Mr. Firth and lands him in jail. After his arrest either the church has disowned him or he it. He has no church affiliation. If Mr. Firth remains unyielding to Marlowe's sense of justice, Miss Lucille Firth is mesmerised. Defying her father, Lulu marries Marlowe. Their marriage is not based on love. It is only carrying a bizarre experiment too far.

Lucille is a wrong choice for Marlowe. He has come to Himpur with a view to starting a church and making something out of nothing. But Lulu proves herself to be a liability and not an asset to him in his effort to create a church in Himpur. She can't win a single soul. She has a genius for rubbing people the wrong way. She can raise "phalanxes
of hostility" (p.119) everytime she opens her mouth. A marriage between "two such diametrically opposed" (p.31) people cannot last long. When his charm is worn off, Lulu realizes that Marlowe has never loved her. Even her own loyalty to him and his cause, since there is no reciprocity of love, reaches a breaking point. She realizes the failure of her marriage. She decides to leave her husband and makes plans for her departure. But Himapur is probably the world's hardest place to leave and she has never made a plan in all her life or taken a journey alone. If Stella has made flawless arrangements for her departure, the "inveterate bungler" (p.163) that she is, Lulu can never accomplish this husband-leaving.

Lulu's premonitions ironically become true. She has always suffered from a phobia that the rickshaw pullers "will slip on purpose" (p.32) to land her in the Khud. Ironically it turns out to be true. Her death by "slipping" into a ravine seems credible. But Anna has reservations about this conclusion. A walk-hater like Lulu would scarcely take this path, according to her. The circumstantial evidence exonerates rickshaw pullers. That she is universally hated may not be sufficient reason for murdering her. But Marlowe has much to gain by her elimination. That he has motive and means for her elimination makes Marlowe the chief suspect in Anna's view.
Morbid fantasies invade Anna's mind. Sometimes she suspects Lulu's murder to be the doing of Madhav Rao out of a sense of 'sober patriotic duty' (p.168). Probing the ravine for clues of this horrifying accident, Anna stumbles on a petrifying dog, Juliet. Her startling discovery in the glades makes her suspect Henry of murdering Stella. That both these 'murders' have taken place on the same side of the ravine leads her to suspect Henry of double murder. But there is no solid proof for her suspicion. She must keep her suspicions to herself for in Himapur law and order is Henry Brewster himself. She feels frighteningly isolated. The British stooge, Nitin, dissuades her by saying it is futile for Anna to pursue justice on behalf of the murdered Stella. Unable to book the culprits, Mitto and Stella hasten their plans for departure.

Denied justice and bloodletting are universalised by Sahgal with a masterly stroke by synchronising Lulu's murder with Austria's declaration of war. Henry, who has given up his dreams of a new political life in England for Stella's love, now helplessly watches her make him a cuckold. With a sense of historic defeat he watches her walk out on him. Marlow who champions the cause of equality tries to fight for justice. He gives witness against the brutality of the
planters towards the workers. Instead of doing justice to the workers, a libel action is taken against Marlowe who is later sentenced to two months' imprisonment. The planters are a law unto themselves. The "practised murderers" (p.41) among them escape scot-free. The magistrates are helpless. Even the Church is merely "one more expression of white solidarity" (p.49). Hence the sensitive Henry feels planters and missionaries are "an administrator's nightmare" (p.31). The British guard their bad examples, as Mitin says, carefully. Justice against them is unavailing. With a sense of futility Anna carries the horror of the double murders with her to England. To her utter disgust, she finds the British jury, too, prejudiced in striking down Tilak's libel case against Valentine Chisolm, the author of Indian Unrest. The British Justice declined to "a Byzantine farce" (p.201). Nicholas, Anna's husband, contemplates thus:

Bickering little identities had become sovereign nations, monarchies had fallen, three empires had been wiped off the map, because justice had not been done. (p.202)

Henry is "a man ahead of his generation" (p.191). He believes in a changing world. While presiding over Khudiram's execution, he contemplates:
There is another England, one that doesn't preside over executions on soil where it has no right to be in the first place. (p.128)

He feels the empire must pack up and go. Holding off insurrection is a waste of time. If his views on Austria's suppression of Serbs, Czechs and Transylvanians bear any import on the British repression of Indians, it would be "their sacred duty to shoot their way out of the empire" (p.38). People like Tilak can only hasten destiny. It is not a few fanatics or bomb-throwing individuals that can defeat the British. The departure of the empire can be accomplished by conscientious people like him, who believe in the "law of moral consequences" (p.130).

Mayantara has skilfully woven many kinds of departure into the texture of this novel. Besides Nitin's and Anna's departure from Himapur, there is Stella's heartless departure from her adoring husband. But Lulu bungles in her departure from her bullying husband. Yet she ironically achieves her final departure from the world itself. A "Reformed" Hindu and a British stooge, Nitin, finally makes his departure from the Raj after the Amritsar incident in 1919. The conquerors in Austro-Hungary and India depart from their imperial domains. Europe departs from its own civilization, in the mud and

This world-wide perspective also takes into account the pre-1914 struggles of British Suffragettes, the Mahatma's efforts on behalf of the voteless in South Africa and the conditions of the oppressed peasants in Central America in the 1950s. A Kaleidoscopic view of all these events is given from the focal point of a group of privileged personalities in an isolated hill station just before and during August 1914.

With an admirable comprehensiveness of vision and skill, Sahgal has linked the apparently disparate events and large scale historical processes across the face of the globe and made them influence private lives. Nicholas, the Foreign Office man in London, writes to Anna, "Private matters will soon be at the mercy of bigger outer events, for that, ultimately, is the tragedy of war" (p.154). Rank injustice and pervading inequality convince Henry that the war has overtaken Europe like retribution. Before his death on the Somme in 1916, Henry writes to Anna, "Except for the fact that the war has overtaken this continent like retribution, and convinces me I am sitting here for the sins of others besides my own, I do very well without the religious impulse" (p.196).
On the eve of the outbreak of war in 1914 Anna is under the mistaken impression that she has stumbled upon some evidence of murder:

She would never understand the heart and mind of an assassin, whatever his motive. She was deathly sick of the war's bloodletting before it had ever begun, and she would never be free of the horror of her discovery in the glade. (p.177)

All these incidents reveal that even socially privileged and personally strong human beings are shown to be not wholly masters of their own destinies, but fragments swept into directions determined by those currents of world affairs that power-wielding people initiate.

The Danish heroine is "an eccentric spinster" (p.16). She abhors exploitation. She likes Henry's anti-imperialism. She finds a kindred spirit in him. She is a foil to Stella. She is fascinated by the very qualities that Stella has disdained in Henry. Sentimental as she is, Anna is drawn towards Henry for she is intrigued by his whole situation and mainly by his obsession with Stella. In her short stay in Himapur, she comes dangerously close to loving him. She is a free-thinker in religion and believes in the tantrics of Hindu religion. Further we are told that she is a spirit out of an Old Norse saga. Anna, endearingly called Tantanna, is
full of visionary ideas. Even in London, while looking at Pierre Duval's prize exhibit, she felt the painting was just like an architect's blue print. She felt, "paint had never played such tricks on canvas before" (p.61). Later in Himapur while gazing at Stella's photographs she feels that they jump into life. Arthur Ravenscroft has not taken into consideration this aspect of Anna Hausen when he remarks:

the discrepancy between her basic soundness of heart and the irrational lapse into unjustified condemnation of another (is a) real weakness of execution. 4

Later Anna confesses that she has fallen in love "with a vision, not merely a man" (p.191). Her startling discovery of the suspected evidence of Henry's crime has knocked down her visionary ideal vehemently. The intensity of her suspicion is indirect proportion to her admiration. Her knowledge that this British District Magistrate has ordered executions and also confessed that Black Hand is an apt organization for him might have stirred her suspicious. Even Henry's letter from Somme leaves the impression that he has silenced Stella

when she has decided to leave him for a lover. Hence Anna can't be blamed if she comes to the conclusion that Stella's love affair too has a cruel, sordidly conventional end. Here it is not rationality but a vision of his crime that overtakes her. Further, Plans for Departure seems to offer a parody of the popular romantic novel. Anna's behaviour seems similar to that of Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey and it offers a sardonic comment on the absurdities that human nature can get up to.

Henry Brewster is surely the theatrical extreme of Anna's effervescences. Anna's brief encounter with him has brought out, as Nicholas feels, "lasting havoc" (p.200), in her. Henry's death unusually subdues her. Anna is humane, not political. But after Henry Brewster's death, his political mantle falls on her. It is curious to find a man behind every sensitive woman character created by the feminist Sahgal. In Storm in Chandigarh there is Vishal Dubey behind Saroj, in The Day in Shadow there is Raj behind Simrit and in Plans for Departure there is Henry Brewster behind Anna Hansen.

Justice and freedom are the pre-requisites of the dynamic world that Sahgal visualizes. In the pilgrimage for justice and freedom, Henry is in the vanguard by virtue
of his finer sentiments. But as a bureaucrat he has little scope to transform the world. Hence he wishes to give up the civil service and join the Labour Party which to him promises "a new world in the making" (p.128). Like Nicholas, he believes that politics offers him scope "to influence policies at their source." But he is ordained for the wrong cause. Like the members of the Black Hand he forfeits his personality. When England declares war, he joins the British forces. Henry who had questioned every order on earth, just obeys without question the order to keep advancing to his own slaughter. In courting death his only hope is if once the present agonies are sorted out, there awaits a tremendous future. This makes a martyr of him.

In this novel Sahgal's main accent is on work. As Nitin Dasu ultimately perceives "Nirvana was neither the art and culture, the law and order of his masters, nor the fire-breathing nationalism of his province. It was Work" (p.112). The essence of the Bhagavad Gita is to carry on the fight envisaged by Lord Krishna - to fight for justice and righteousness. Hence Realisation is not an ultimate end. The Realised one, as Madhav Rao analyses Tilak's interpretation
of the Gita to Anna, has to "hurry back from private bliss to public duty and spend the rest of one's life making the world a better place" (p.123).

The work-ethic is closely intertwined with the idea of colonization and the need for its obliteration from the face of the earth. The British must learn to reject Shelbourne's theory. Anna expresses Nayantara Sahgal's views when she says, "every country should sink into total insignificance as soon as possible" (p.205). Nicholas, who understands the shortsightedness of the official mind, contemplates the urgency of gradual colonial reform. He believes the time is ripe for a crucial step forward.

Anna is disappointed because the world has not changed enough in her lifetime. She desires to accelerate the processes of change. Hence she too becomes a politician. Further, she has chosen an Indian political activist as a bride for her son, Peter. This "flame of a girl" (p.212), is akin to Anna. The wonder of a torch that Anna has been is now passed on to the bride. From the union of Peter and this "dynamo" is born Gayatri. Gayatri has inherited her mother's strong Indian genes and political involvement.
Jisan, of a like mind, is chosen by Anna to wed Gayatri. Thus Sahgal emphasises that the onus of changing the world rests squarely on the shoulders of politicians since they can influence policies at their source. Anna’s desire to hasten the dawn of the new world reflects the desire of the author. But Sahgal is not a naive artist whose visualised ideal is incompatible with the immediacies and contingencies of the world. She thinks the world will remain more or less as it is. Though people of every age have power to fulfil their dreams, for some complex reason they fail and the human sacrifice would continue. The novel ends on a solemn note:

Oddly enough, we are the legacy of our aches, of plans that never came to pass. (p.213)

Probably the solution to the ills of the world lies in total dedication to one’s own work. Madhav Rao is so completely absorbed in his picture-taking that he seems to be in a trance and lost to the world. His dedication endows a mystic unity between him and his camera, and it flags Anna’s distraught and scattered energies into sheer obedience. Then Anna feels, “If she did not move, wounds would heal, friendship would flower, and answers would be serenely, miraculously delivered” (p.122).
Plans for Departure shows Nayantara Sahgal at her most subtle as a manipulator of plots. The champion of individual liberty and castigator of State power in this novel turns into a weaver of plots who, instead of a journalistic unrolling of a bonanza of historical details, delves into the psyche of men who ran the British Empire. This she does at a time when the Raj mania seems to be catching up thanks to such works as The Jewel in the Crown, A Passage to India and Gandhi still winning large audiences at book stores, box offices and on television. As Keki Daruwalla points out, the significance of Plans for Departure is that instead of Paul Scotts and Forsters writing about the English in India “we have an Indian at last raking the embers in her grate.”

Starting on a note of social comedy and passing through the tragic tenor Plans for Departure which is both practical and metaphysical stresses (through the letter from the tormented Brewster which Anna remembers) the essential need for the cultivation of the humane outlook. “Those of us who must grow old during this violent new century will need all our human resources to remain human” (p.195-196).