CHAPTER - III

RECONSTRUCTION, POLITICAL AND INDIVIDUAL: A STUDY OF
STORM IN CHANDIGARH

In *Storm in Chandigarh* Nayantara Sahgal is concerned with the artistic depiction of a bewildering retreat from Gandhian values. In this novel the political perspective projected in *This Time of Morning* is subtly focussed in terms of a drama of social relationships and ideological perceptions as obtaining in the post-Independence India marching towards economic prosperity. Sahgal's main concern still remains the same: the growth of the individual and his response to freedom and change in the context of the changing socio-political structure of India.

Nayantara Sahgal's fictional world is peopled as usual with men of destiny and the women behind them living on more or less equal terms. Vishal Dubey, the young intelligent Indian administrative Officer, is the centre of consciousness in this novel. The bureaucracy on which the responsibility of effecting the transition rests on is represented by Vishal Dubey, Prasad, Trivedi and Kachru. The high drama in the social sphere is enacted by the high living and low thinking business magnates and their wives.
Mikhail Ray, the textile tycoon and his wife Gauri who calls herself 'a social butterfly' (p.162), belong to the elite of New Delhi. Inder, who manages the textile mills of Mikhail Ray in Chandigarh, and his wife, Saroj, lead an elegant life in Chandigarh. But they are the mis-matched couple bound by the proverbial padlock of wedlock. Jit Sahni, the pioneering Indian liquor manufacturer and his sociable wife, Tamara, familiarly known as Mara, are another mis-matched couple, who finally realise the need for 'the oxygen of understanding', come out of their 'caves', communicate with each other and thus settle down to lead a harmonious life.

"You can't get away from politics in this country."¹ Inder tells Mara in Storm in Chandigarh. The political and the social worlds are intertwined and they make an impact on the individual consciousness. This is one of Nayantara Sahgal's convictions. Hence all her novels are set against the backdrop of a political situation. Politics can be said to be her 'primordial predilection.' As Jasbir

¹Nayantara Sahgal, Storm in Chandigarh (Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1970), p. 189. All subsequent citations are to this edition.
Jain observes, "the political consciousness becomes a positive asset in her succeeding novels." As the title of the novel suggests, the political turmoil over Chandigarh provides the scaffolding. Following the linguistic bifurcation of the truncated, post-partition Punjab in the early 60s, Chandigarh remains with the Centre, though it has become the capital for both the newly emerged states of the Hindi-speaking Haryana and the Punjabi speaking Punjab.

The partition has not made them wiser. They dismember the state once again. Chandigarh which signifies the construction of a new nation is rocked with violence. The presence of both the state governments in the same capital intensifies their quarrels over boundaries, water and electricity. Each government claims Chandigarh exclusively as its own. Mahantara Sahgal chooses to render artistically the confrontation between the stormy Chief Minister of Punjab, Gyan Singh, and the altruistic Chief Minister of Haryana, Harpal Singh. Gyan threatens to

demonstrate the strength of his demand by launching a crippling strike at Bhakra that covers both the regions. Violence is political blackmail. Vishal Dubey, an honest and up-and-coming central officer, is entrusted with the work of effecting rapprochement between warring factions, counselling patience, easing tensions and saving the situation from exploding. The Union Home Minister, who modestly calls himself "a relic" of Gandhian past in modern Indian history, selects Vishal Dubey for this difficult task because of his "gift for tackling a problem at the human level" (p.8). 

In this novel Nayantara Sahgal deals with the emerging new order in the post-Independence India where the growth and welfare of the individual ought to be the ultimate concern. Her choice of locale is significant in this regard. For the mutilated masses of Punjab, who paid heavily at the time of partition and are trying to heal their past wounds and uprooted emotions, the newly built capital Chandigarh symbolises a new order. Designed by Le Corbusier, with its stark architecture, Chandigarh symbolises not only a new but also an alien order. In building this city acres of glass is imprinted into the
exquisite lace-like cement work of the walls. Vishal Dubey, an alien brought into the scene of action and who serves as the narrator's pair of eyes, is nagged with a worry:

Why was modern living synonymous with glass, showing every fingerprint, stain, and flick of dust in a country where dust and dirt abounded? This was architecture transplanted, not conceived here, and he wondered how successful it was. Or for that matter how successful democracy was, superimposed on illiterate masses, exploding millions of them. (p.210)

The western exterior superimposed upon traditional mores results in a sense of culture shock and emotional rootlessness which are experienced in the modern Indian context. As Jit Sahni observes:

... the whole conception was too big, too true to be a setting for pretty people. I don't like a lot of the buildings here but there's something fearless about the whole idea. Only the people haven't measured up ...

.. The architects couldn't find the right breed of human beings to inhabit their perfect blueprints. (p.49)
The novel opens with the Union Home Minister's statement, "Violence lies very close to the surface in the Punjab." Very soon Vishal discovers how violence manifests itself at various levels. Chandigarh is the representative centre of stormy activity, both at political and personal levels. The political tensions between the two states are in a way reflected in the personal tensions of Saroj and Inder, and Mara and Jit. Reviewing *Storm in Chandigarh*, Robert Lomas says Sahgal is more interested in the love affair than the politics. He says, "Here the political issue's chiefly a symptom of a socially pervasive violence of attitude that appears more seductively in the marriages." This emerging metaphor of locale is the pivot of the moral design of the novel, not merely as a centre of action, but also as a symbol of the conflicting temperaments of a group. While the insensitive, dominating boors turn violent, the wise and the idealistic are sedate. It is against this background of imminent paralysis of the ordinary modes of living in an atmosphere charged with emotion and defined by violent attitudes, that Vishal Dubey...
undertakes to restore balance and sanity. Vishal, a passive spectator in the beginning is caught unawares in the 'storms' on both the planes because of his 'sense of involvement.' He is instrumental in controlling the raging storm on both the planes. The way the political and personal themes are interwoven through "identical points of structure, analogous patterns and apt juxtapositions" is a sure sign of Sahgal's technical competence.

The confrontation between Gyan and Harpal is more significant than a mere clash of personalities. Fundamentally it is a conflict of ideas: the cult of violence versus the creed of non-violence, material prosperity versus human values. Gyan is an unscrupulous opportunist for whom personal gain is the most predominant concern. His lack of moral scruples dates back to the partition days. Even during those tragic days, while escorting people into the Indian territory, he had chosen only those who could offer him more money, turning a deaf ear to the pathetic pleas of the poor. Ironically Vishal's humanistic concern was noticed at that time itself. Gyan's aggression and ruthlessness may be a result of his

childhood deprivation, as in the case of Kalyan Sinha in *This Time of Morning*. In a fortuitous life, an uneducated truck driver to begin with, Gyan has played successfully the roles of a political campaign manager, ironically enough, for Harpal Singh himself at one time, an industrialist and now the Chief Minister of Punjab. He cuts an impressive figure at conferences, his great bulk and resonant voice dominating their proceedings. He is, as the editor of a journal comments, a living monument to the urban working class, a man who has risen from the ranks and yet remains one with them in spite of the dizzy rise to power.

In an age that is quite conscious of the needs of the common man, Gyan is its most distinguished representative in the country. He is "a megalomaniac whose vision of grandeur and glory and supreme strength have to be realised only in a negative fashion." Ignoring the democratic norms of dialogue and debate as means of settling political differences, he resorts to violence which for him is a means for demonstrating his strength.

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In contrast to him, Harpal Singh, a true patriot, with an unwavering loyalty to the country, finds himself out of tune with the times. He feels that there is "something sinister in the root of the Partition mentality and those who upheld it" (p. 28). A staunch integrationist, he is the political counterfoil to Gyan Singh in all matters. His altruism stands in direct contrast to Gyan's cynical egoism and unscrupulousness. As he himself recalls introspectively, "he could not remember a time when he had wanted power. What he had passionately wanted was recognition as a Champion of the underdog. And he had earned that" (p. 42).

If Harpal is concerned with long-term measures in the task of nation building, Gyan's main stress is on progress and power. He is dedicated to progress. But he is, as Dubey observes, an audacious, perverted genius for whom ends, not means, are important. He is utterly callous to human beings and their emotions and is ruthless while dealing with a situation. He has very clear goals in life and has no scruples in attaining them.

Gyan, the unethical demagogue, can, with equal felicity, exploit the inherent duality in religion to
further his personal ambitions. In this novel Dubey and Trivedi, like Rakesh and Kailas in *This Time of Homing*, exhibit a healthy approach to religion. They want to use the Hindu tradition for meaningful, positive action. Trivedi turns to the *Mahavir Gita* because it stresses the value of devotion to duty with a sense of detachment. Dubey has imbibed this lesson so thoroughly that besides practising it himself, he encourages others to do so. Through his advice he makes Harpal and Seroj leave their passivity and take up a positive stance. But to the depraved Gyan, religion is a matter of neither morality nor ethics. It is only a tool to further his ends. While he presents his case for a Punjabi-speaking state, he mingles the issues of religion and language and carries the day. He describes himself as "a simple man fired with a simple purpose, to call his soil his own in the language of his forefathers" (p.141). But this apparently simple desire cunningly conceals his own immoral impulse to power.

For Gyan power makes for respectability. As Jit tells Dubey, "there's only one kind of strength that's understood here. Force, Authority. The other kinds are for the books" (p.49). Gyan knows it very well. So he
pursues power politics. Further, his name has become synonymous with accomplishment. Hence he has a following and a credibility as a leader who lives upto the expectations of the people. Beside his magnetic personality, the candid Harpal seems insipid and dwarfish to the people. By nurturing the fanatical instincts of people and promoting their parochial tendencies, Gyan, the rabble-rouser, prevails on them. This is disheartening to people like Harpal whose view is far more secular and humanistic. In his every encounter with Gyan, Harpal is aware of losing some ground and he actively contemplates resigning his Chief Ministership. Between them, Dubey realizes, there is more than a political battle. "It was a battle of philosophies. The juster but vaguer range of possibility could seldom hold out against violent immediate claims supported by the obvious" (p.120).

Harpal is unhappy that power and not conviction has become the motivating force for men in politics. In estimating the progress of the nation, like Kailas in This Time of Morning, Harpal believes that the human being is the 'unit and measure of success.' Gyan is quite indifferent to the human element. Yet he can "come to immediate grips
with a situation and manipulate it to suit himself" (p.72). If Harpal is a crusader, Gyan is a manipulator.

In *Storm in Chandigarh* violence spreads because it is tolerated. Nobody makes a stand against it. People are inert and indifferent and allow violence to mount and ebb like some tidal wave, waiting for it to engulf them. The crisis in Chandigarh is due to surrendering the force of the moral personality of man to the evil of passivity, apathy and indifference. This passivity has no place even in the scheme of dynamic neutrality which Nehru evolved in the context of international peace. Ideologically oriented people like Harpal sit paralysed waiting for Heaven to send them a sign. Active people, like Gyan, are aggressive and have no principles and what is worse, no scruples. Hence violence, Dubey feels, is the joint product of the aggressive and the inert.

The situation in Chandigarh is marked by violence on one hand and the policy of wait and watch on the other, a policy which is characterised by indifference. People are afraid to accept challenges, to act or even to think. As Dubey feels, the situation here is not one of tension,
but one of paralysis. A general malaise seems to have overtaken the whole country. In this novel Sahgal is focussing attention on this national ailment. A mass movement is degraded into a 'political trick'. There are no issues, but only squabbles. One of the central ideas in *Storm in Chandigarh* is "whether a tradition of reflection and moderation can provide adequate leadership in a time which seems to call for energetic and decisive leaders."^6

Concluding her article, "A Search for Answers," Nayantara affirms:

I think it is worth remembering that freedom means creativity, adventure, experimentation, even risk. I do not believe that these are possible without voluntary choices for action and co-operation.^

Since freedom is a cherished possession it must be safeguarded by action, not sacrificed at the altar of false morality by inaction. Hence Vishal advises Harpal to make

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a stand against inaction. Harpal, the man who lacks conviction, is initiated into action. Consequently the strike becomes ineffective. This novel points out "Sahgal's thesis that passive good cannot oppose active evil." Since "we cannot pin-point the responsibility for inaction, for insensitivity, for non-performance," Sahgal wishes that the intelligentsia must feel it as their obligation to rouse people into positive action which involves a search for value, for freedom and for the "best light." Saroj, the victim of male tyranny, who finally indicates her innocence and liberates herself from a unilateral marital relationship learns these values from Dubey during their walks together:

... life, Dubey told her, 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. (p.191)


There is nothing wrong about loyalties as long as a larger vision unites them. But Gyan's petty loyalties to his religion, language and province hamper the cultivation of a broad national outlook. Hence they dishearten Harpal. Gyan's style of functioning reveals a retreat from Gandhian values in our contemporary political world. His inspiration is "more a scandal sheet" (p.182), than a newspaper through which he provokes people. One of his supporters shoots at Harpal. It coincides with the death of the Union Home Minister, a relic of the Gandhian past in modern Indian history. It offers Gyan a good opportunity to call off his strike, since his sole aim of demonstrating his strength is fulfilled and the strike is no longer useful to him. But he glorifies his petty, motivated action as a mark of respect for the death of a great patriot. Dubey too returns to Delhi. Dubey realizes much to his dismay that everyone, including his senior officers, feels happy that a confrontation has been avoided. It occurs to him that now people are satisfied with temporary solutions. No one really goes into the details of a problem to find lasting solutions. He discovers himself a lonely crusader in his
search for action. The only person who would have appre­
ciated his action, the Home Minister, is now gone. His
“positive administrative achievement turns out into an
act of dubious merit — mere brinkmanship.” Thus the
death of the Gandhian relic marks the end of the Gandhian
era and the decline of excellence in public life. In each
of Sahgal’s successive novels “the retreat from Gandhian
ideals in the contemporary political situation seems to be
final.” Sahgal is aware that if the spirit of the Mahatma
survives anywhere in the world “it is certainly not India.”

This retreat has penetrated into the personal world.
Inder seems to vie with Gyan in his disdain for other human
beings. To this insensitive, self-centred, dominating indi­
vidual with a western gloss, wife is ‘one half of an enter­
prise’ (p. 53). She is for sensual gratification. Her
sphere of self-expression is limited to procreation. With
his primitive notion of male domination, he believes that

10 M. L. Malhotra, “Nayantara Sahgal: The Angry Young
Woman,” in Bridges of Literature: 23 Critical Essays in
Literature, by M. L. Malhotra (Ajmer: Sunanda Publications,
1971), 229.

11 Jasbir Jain, Nayantara Sahgal (New Delhi: Arnold

12 Nayantara Sahgal, “Murder of Gandhiji Continues,”
even after a thousand years a woman will need a master
and will respect a man who will command her. As Lakshmi
Sinha points out, "Saroj cannot succumb to this situation
because she believes in equality and involvement, and is
symbolic of the 'New Woman' who wants to do things for her
own satisfaction."13

Vishal believes that decent human relations can be
built upon love, patience and truth. But Inder discards
these qualities as superfluous. To take a walk with Saroj
becomes a meaningless expenditure of time for him. He can
never treat his wife as a friend with whom he can "be naked
in spirit" (p.69). As Malhotra observes, "He is the type of
man who pursues life with his mind closed and the fly open,
making up in wrath what he wants in reason."14

Marriage with such a man ceases to be a union of
hearts. Love and understanding - the essential ingredients
of a happy marriage - are missing in their lives. Saroj
fears rather than loves her husband. To such a callous person

13 Lakshmi Sinha, "Nayantara Sahgal's Storm in
Chandigarh: A Search for Values," in Studies in Indian
Fiction in English, ed., by G.S. Balamasa Gupta (Gulbarga:

14 M. L. Malhotra, Bridges of Literature, (Ajmer:
in her 'enchanting innocence' she reveals her once-upon-a-time intimacy. This disclosure evokes in Inder a revulsion, not a moral revulsion, but one coming from male hegemony. For while he himself has been robustly gathering experience in sex, he now applies a double moral code and considers her premarital sex a serious moral lapse. Her openness spells disaster for Saroj. There is an unbridgeable chasm between them. In spite of the fact that they have lived together, loved, produced children and been rearing them up, they live as strangers 'in intimacy.' It is, according to Dubey, real 'torture'. Inder often resurrects the boy in his imagination and nags her with his questions. At such moments his very voice hurts her like "a rawhide whip, flicked at her nerves" (p.94).

Inder's violent reaction to Saroj's pre-marital affair is similar to Gyan's when the boy was kidnapped during the election campaign. Like the apathetic Harpal in the political sphere, Saroj is docile. By the liberal standards of her upbringing, Saroj is not guilty. On her part she is warmly and wholly involved in her marriage. But Inder, obsessed with Saroj's transgression, uses chastity as a weapon to humble her. His attitude is in
keeping with his ruthless and aggressive nature. She is left, isolated and unhappy beating against "his numbness like a bird against a window pane, trapped in a futile frenzy" (p.97). The communication gap between them is the result of their incompatible attitudes. As Jasbir Jain observes, "Saroj’s pre-marital lapse is in fact only an outward symbol of the difference in their attitudes."15 Saroj, who belongs to the 'sphere of intense, sharpened sensibility' (p.199), wants to be recognized as an individual and that individualism should form the basis of their relationship. But Inder, who "belongs to the he-man school" (p.160), treats her merely as a wife—a possession, not a person.

Inder successfully tramples upon her personality. She is no longer the New Woman. She is diffident. She is like Harpal in her passive acceptance. In spite of her shattered psyche she is still not defeated. She seeks to please Inder in order to save her marriage. She clings to moments of response and communication. It is in this atmosphere surcharged with emotion and defined by violent attitudes that Vishal Dubey undertakes to restore sanity and

central to the lives of the men and women in Chandigarh. The novel, *Storm in Chandigarh*, opens with the Union Home Minister's statement that violence lies very close to the surface in the Punjab. Mayantara Sahgal shows in the novel how violence is confined not merely to the political sphere. The emotional violence involved in Inter's suspicion blends the theme of political violence with that of hypocrisy and domestic disharmony. The cult of violence, emotional or political, leads to the desecration of the individual self.

Sahgal would no doubt agree with Sarojini Naidu's opinion that the civilization of the country depends on the position enjoyed by women in it. Mayantara is a champion of the feminist cause. Even the idea of the emancipation of women is seen in the context of freedom—political, moral and psychological—which in India of the present day, as she observes, has not yet become a way of life. This view is clear from Vishal's expression, "there's a yearning for freedom in everything that lives" (p.225). But in India "Freedom is just an isolated political achievement for us. It hasn't become a habit of mind or the way of life" (p.225), as the authorial voice observes.
Behind the facade of Conformity, Leela Dubey lives a life of sustained and sophisticated pretence and calculated infidelity. As Sahgal points out, mere defiance of convention does not denote freedom. Freedom is a mental inclination, a refusal to tolerate injustice. So what is required is not mere conformity to conventions, but caring for principles. Dubey's concept of Higher Morality is a search for value, and an attempt to choose the better value in any situation. It involves compassion in its true sense of "understanding human nature which recognizes the law of change and growth." Inder's failure to realize this has disrupted his marital harmony. On the other hand, Leela Dubey makes a mockery of her marriage by not realizing that true relationship is shorn of pretence. Hence Dubey's marriage turns out to be "a vanishing search for communication" (p. 23).

Vishal resurrects Saroj's personality and makes her realize that truth between people reduces "the heart-break and a lot of the loneliness of living" (p. 89). But the

egotistic Inder, with his primitive notion of male domination, cannot relish truth. Any effort at growth on the part of Saroj looks like an act of betrayal to Inder. Saroj recognizes that to live without pretence is the “ultimate healing balm” (p. 201). She learns that endurance is not a virtue. Finally she asserts her individuality by leaving Inder and thus rejecting the role he wants to thrust on her. In this regard she resembles Mora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.

The relationships among the mismatched couples in this novel has led Professor K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar to remark “it is almost like a chapter from John Updike’s Couples.” This comment would prove complementary if we do not lose sight of the intentions of the novelist. Besides the Inder-Saroj episode, the Jit-Mara and the Vishal-Leela episodes serve to reinforce Sahgal’s conviction that emotional violence can be caused either by a husband or by a wife. The storm which *Storm in Chandigarh* depicts, in spite of all its political manifestations has in its eye as it were the tangled web of human relationships. For Leela Dubey pretence becomes

her second self and Vishal's endeavours to build a decent relationship with her are frustrated. Jit is a foil to Inder. While Inder uses chastity to undo his marriage by torturing Saroj for her past lapse failing to recognize her 'untouched innocence and integrity,' Jit saves his marriage with the erring Mara through compassion and a willingness to accept the fallibility of a human being. As Vishal says, "The high spots come and go. They aren't most of life" (p.123). So are the imperfections. Since the human being is not infallible, what is required in marriage is not perfection but a comradeship. Sahgal stresses "the glory of communication" (p.224), in establishing this comradeship. That alone creates a congenial atmosphere for the flowering of the individual self. As M.N. Sarme points out there is an undercurrent of humanistic concern in Mayantara Sahgal's work which is her "solution to political confrontations, social evils and individual conflicts." ¹⁸

Vishal Dubey is more or less the Jamesian central intelligence in the novel providing a perspective on crumbling politics and the crumbling marriages. He prompts

Harpal and Saroj to make a positive stand. Harpal is shot at by an admirer of Gyan. Vishal is slapped by Indir for sending Saroj away to Delhi. When Indir slaps him, Vishal does not boil with rage. He simply feels "kinship with Harpal ... and with Saroj, another kind of victim" (p.241). This reaction is a masterly stroke of a mature artist. Apart from linking Dubey with the Gandhian policy of resistance without malice, it establishes an equation between the personal and political worlds. The abatement of the storm and the resolution take place simultaneously in both the worlds. While the political action of the novel is rounded off with the death of the Union Home Minister, the novel ends on a note of instant communication established between Saroj and Dubey who arrive in Delhi. Comradeship and communication become possible, as Nayantara Sahgal describes it, when freedom is not just an isolated political achievement but a "way of life," "a habit of mind" (p.225), something deeply ingrained in man's being vitalizing his very capacity for experience.