CHAPTER - IV

DEATH AND RESURRECTION : A SITUATION IN NEW DELHI

Nayantara Sahgal's fifth novel, *A Situation in New Delhi*, is a novel of ideas. If it is a sequel to her earlier novel, *This Time of Morning*, in being a political novel through and through, it is also a precursor to her next novel, *Rich Like Us*, in its scathing criticism of the ruling party. In each of these succeeding novels Nayantara shows her intimate knowledge of the corridors of power. The political backdrop of this novel is the sudden demise of Shivraj, the Prime Minister of India, and the resultant imbroglio.

The novel opens tersely with the calamitous news of the death of Shivraj, the Prime Minister for which no one is prepared. Shivraj himself wanted to live long enough to ensure that freedom and democracy for which he stood took deep roots in the Indian soil. His premature death before his wish to establish a democratic republic of virtue is fulfilled is a cause of great concern for all patriots. His death creates an ideological void in the country.

Usman Ali, the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University, speaks outspokenly of the situational change in the country and
the fall in the standards of public life after Shivraj's death:

If you want to be pure, you can't run a government - though Shivraj did work to establish the nearest thing to a republic of virtue. There's not even a pretense at it now. The great and growing power of the state threatens to engulf us. We'll never be properly self-governing in this country until we vest power in little units, in people at the base. ¹

There is a lurking fear that if the ideals of freedom and democracy cherished by Shivraj are abandoned, an authoritarian rule will follow.

Ironically it is not Shivraj's enemies, but his followers that have slighted his ideals. The decline of values in the political sphere set in motion by men like Hari Mohan and Somnath in This Time of Morning and continued by Gyan Singh in Storm in Chandigarh reaches a crescendo in A Situation in New Delhi. Shivraj took the present Minister

for Minerals and Metals into his Cabinet only to appease the revolutionaries and thus to avoid a split in the party. Further, with his fascination for the youth, Shivraj considered this person "good material for training" (p.93). But later he might have understood this to be his crucial error of judgement which will reverse his life's work. Hence Michael, a friend and biographer of Shivraj, surmises that Shivraj has lost the will to live on account of the collapse of the value system he has tried to nurture into a way of life.

Shivraj's followers and his party men are now eager to abandon his policies and commit themselves to the idea of progress. They lack Shivraj's sagacity and perception. Shivraj who led the country to freedom knew the people and their aspirations well. But these men at the helm of affairs now are mediocrities. They are men, Devi feels, who have "never done anything with their hands, or had any collision with real life" (p.15). Hence they are unrealistic in their approach to political problems.

In their concern for progress these men appear to be akin to Kalyan Sinha in *This Time of Morning* and Gyan
Singh in *Storm in Chandigarh*. But even this similarity is superficial. While Kalyan and Gyan are dedicated to progress, the successors of Shivraj are obsessed with the idea of progress rather than with progress itself. Even if Kalyan and Gyan are ruthless they have the saving grace of efficiency which is absent in the successors of Shivraj.

These "intellectuals" lack even one good sensible programme. They believe that one hypothesis can be true for ever. They try to "make revolution by the rules of a book" (p.16). For them the only way of bringing social justice appears to be by starting the class-war. Devi thinks:

They were for the Poor and the Small against the Rich and the Big and as proud of it as if they had discovered social justice all by themselves. (p.129)

They have no practical notions in their "professorial heads" (p.16). The class-war they have started is simmering in the streets and outside their offices. Unable to control it, they throw more bait in the form of rabble-rousing speeches and lavish promises. Consequently there is agitation everywhere - in the streets, power plants and in the corridors of the university.
Their mindless act of playing at revolution sets the clock back dangerously. All the sovereign forces that bring change, improvement and mellowness in the course of time have been cut off deliberately. This disruption of smooth life is artistically rendered by Sahgal by using the air conditioner as a symbol. When her air-conditioner stops, Devi, Shivraj's sister, wonders if she were an ordinary citizen and not a Minister would the electrician turn up to repair it. She feels, "the interconnected reliability upon which daily life rested had disappeared" (p.16).

Except the class-war they incite, there is nothing revolutionary in their approach. The word, "revolution," itself loses its meaning. As Neuman in Rich Like Us reflects, "Almost any shoot-out was labelled revolution, even if all it changed was the clique at the top for another clique at top."2 The Cabinet ministers, like Sumer Singh in The Day in Shadow, profess to be radicals. But they are far removed from the millions of their country and have nothing in common with them, not even the political aspirations, leave alone a way of life. Instead of fostering freedom and individuality in the multitudes, these ministers

themselves lack individual identity. Like the sheep that bleat in unison in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* these ministers acquiesce in everything expressed by that voci-ferous Minister for Minerals and Metals. This "shiniest-eyed radical in the cabinet" (p.128), is their great favourite and spokesman.

As Dr G.J.Chinnewararao observes, "Nayantara's political animadversions and penetrating asides give an edge to her delineation of the unseemly goings-on within the party."<sup>3</sup> Pinky's grand father castigates the present political set-up thus:

This bunch put everything he (Shivraj) stood up on his funeral pyre with him. First casualty, common sense. Revolution my left toe. Revolution in a cream puff with the cream all going to them. Plenty from this one house, let me tell you. (p.38)

His conversation with Devi further reveals how the party funds are misused to pay even the fornication bills of this

Minister for Minerals and Metals. This amoral and corrupt minister talks of revolution and radicalism in phrases that roll out with "laboratory-perfect" (p.128), precision. Devi feels "queerly isolated" among these members of hackneyed phrases and empty talk.

These pseudo-radicals, inspite of their high promises, can bring no worth while changes in the society. The ambivalent nature of Hinduism abets the stagnation in society. Besides this discontentment, the rabble-rousing speeches of the ministers incite people to violence. Usman, the great educationist, feels that the boredom of the Hindus with their apathy and inactivity manifests itself as violence. Since no Hindu is able to provide a solution to it, Usman desires to provide a Hindu solution to it.

Among the young violence is a mode of resenting the stagnant forms of society. In his briefing to Skinny, Bishad succinctly expresses the disillusionment of the youth thus:

Politicians, whatever their political colour, whatever they piously said, got fat from office. They would never banish the contrasts, never in
ten thousand years build an equal society ...
It would take the young to build, and to do that they had to pledge themselves to sober, calculated destruction. There is no other way. (p.67)

Since the words have failed to show any impact, action is imperative. So the youth, led by Naren, resorts to shock therapy to activate the inert, complacent society.

This group aims at removing surgically hunger and the terrible inequality in the society. They have their own code of behaviour. They believe this "cult of violence had to be clean, cold and disciplined, unaided by motive, by drugs or mental aberrations" (p.58). They wish to create a new social order, a Utopia for the poor and the downtrodden, an Indian utopia, where everybody will have food in the stomach and a decent wage.

Even if their aims are good, their means are scornful. The demagogues have instilled in them a wrong notion that revolution is possible only when the existing order is completely destroyed. So through systematic creation of panic, they want to create chaos and thus proceed to destruction. "Destroy - and ye shall find" (p.27), has
almost become their motto. But they fail to realize that the past is not a monolith to be seized and destroyed. They too, like the ruling party, attempt to break with the past — a break, which Osman thinks, cannot take place. Sooner or later "it flowed back, and in spite of its accusers it did not prevent people from learning new things" (p.27).

These young people are involved in their own crusade led by a desire to find purpose and meaning in life. They are charmed by the instant success that violence brings them. Their only conviction is that once the common people are roused, they would eventually learn what is good for them. But their hope is belied. In both the fronts — rural and urban — they realize the enormity of their task when they come up against the passivity of the rural as well as the urban poor.

Unlike the Gandhian rural-based movement, Rishad’s movement totally excludes rural areas because of the conviction that farmers are not ripe for action. Rishad feels thus:

They were just waiting, rooted to their patches of soil, for the rain to come. Once it did they
would not care a fig for anything else. To stir, to break and rebuild that mentality was beyond him and his group (p.68).

The movement does not meet with any great success in the urban areas too. Except their leader, Naren, others fail to identify themselves completely with the common man. Rishad is painfully conscious of this limitation. He learns how difficult it is to make the quarry workers, who lead a "time-stopped existence" (p.97), realize that they are human. Then how can they reuse the common-man?

What Shivraj is to politics, Naren is to the movement. Both these leaders provide right perspective to their followers. Like Shivraj's death, Naren's death throws the movement in utter chaos. Rishad and his group are yet to learn that violence, even if it spells out a particular mode of action, is in the long run self-defeating for the panic and fear it creates is incapable of creating the environment for positive action. Failure is embedded in the movement itself for any movement nursed on hatred and violence cannot have a better fate.
Only Usman has the right notion of ushering in a smooth revolution in keeping with India's traditional background. Since the attaining of freedom is not a terminating point, it is futile to cling to Shivraj or Nehru or Gandhi in a society which is in need of change. But this change is impossible through imported revolutions. Usman is well aware that revolutions do "not get congealed in their tracks or follow beaten tracks" (p.30). Further any change is possible only with the consent and participation of the people. Revolution, he emphasizes, if it is to succeed, must be non-violent.

Usman is in the true Gandhian tradition. He does not belong to the breed that needs power in order to do things. He wants to take the government to the people. Instead of the present government where power is being centralised, he hankers "for another form of government, one that didn't build up and up into a formidable state apparatus. He would build down with maximum power to the small community" (p.83). He has the Gandhian courage to resign, to dissociate himself from power and to lead a new revolution asking those who wish to accompany him to pledge themselves to peaceful action.
In this connection it is worth noting Jasbir Jain's observation that the thematic concern of the novel is "the meaning of revolution and the ways of bringing it about."

The novel opens with the depiction of the death of Shivraj, who led the country to freedom and who became the first Prime Minister of the country. His followers and party men want to give new interpretation to Shivraj's life and make the world see him as a man influenced by communism. They reject Michael's biography of Shivraj for it lacks this interpretation of Shivraj's life. Thus the ruling party completely distorts the ideals of Shivraj. Devi, Shivraj's widowed sister, is taken into the Union Cabinet as a gesture of respect to the departed leader. But the ruling class have never imagined that she possesses a mind of her own. Once they learn that Devi is trying to assert her individuality they try to blot out her reputation, and Devi says, "That will be the fate of those of us who have minds of our own" (p.162). This authoritarianism reaches its climax in Righ Like Us where Sonali,

a civil servant with an independent mind, is demoted and defamed for having a mind of her own.

Though Devi is not a women of ideas, like Shivraj in the past, Usman in the present feeds her with ideas. She feels that the political situation has subtly changed and has lost the sense of direction which was there in Shivraj's time. She feels completely isolated from this "new aristocracy" and "the privileged around the cabinet table."

In the absence of Shivraj's idealism and his faith in humane values asserting themselves, the pseudo-radicalism of the Cabinet only adds confusion to the already existing chaos. While people like Arvind and Pinky have no views or values and lead a superficial existence, Rishad realises that violence which can shock and create panic can, like power, merely become an end in itself, an aimless terror aimlessly released. In an agonised determination to stop it, he pays with his life. Sahgal, who leaves out tragedy by option from her novels, her comes nearer to one in writing the death of Rishad. Rishad's death, coming as it does after he reaches a new awareness, is tragic indeed. His death
is contrasted with the hour of his birth thus bringing life and death on the same plane, forcing the reader to see the tragic waste of it all. As Jasbir Jain observes, "Rishad, like Haren and Madhu, is a sacrifice to the creed of violence."^{5}

While all other characters are hesitant and are groping their way, Usman alone has a clear perception and is truly and deeply involved in the larger issues of life. The trouble at the university, he perceives, is merely a symptom of the socially pervasive illness. Its remedy lies in many areas outside education. He feels the urgency to avert the chaos before it engulfs everything. His resignation from the Vice-Chancellorship is a sacrifice compared to several acts of political sacrilege. He frees himself from position of power in order to provide direction to the youth with whom he makes common cause. His faith in non-violence and his humanistic impulses make his endeavour a success. In true Gandhian spirit, he lays accent on sacrifice and individual penance:

Individual penance for individual salvation, never mind what happened to the world or your neighbour. It was not his particular way, but it was a way. That was how progress and change might be brought about here, by touching the individual readiness for hardship, the personal desire for sacrifice. (p.158)

Usman brings a new integrity into being and thus becomes a symbol of humanistic values.

Usman's expectations of truth asserting itself through his method are not belied. A young student comes to him and atones for a reprehensible act for which he is not responsible individually. He shares in a sense of collective responsibility which he feels as a member belonging to the student community in disarray. He carries the inherited burden of sin on his shoulders. While this is so, students listening to Usman at the crossroads appear like a "crooked cross," a cross which Usman carries with determination and singular aim to the end of his life. The cross which Usman carries brings about, according to Michael, the resurrection of Shivraj's ideals. This resurrection of Shivraj's ideals we see in both Michael and Usman. That is the reason why Michael thinks; "perhaps we've been in too much of a hurry to say he is dead" (p.165).
There is in *A Situation in New Delhi*, juxtaposition between the past and the present and between tradition and revolution. Each of these projects a value system of its own. Politically there are many different standpoints like Shivraj's idealism and faith in human beings, the cabinet's pseudo-radicalism, Devi's helpless inactivity and Rishad's faith in violence. Pinky's superficial life is contrasted with that of Skinny on the one hand and that of Madhu on the other. To Pinky and her friends, Tani and Reba, marriage is only "a change" (p.148) which gives them freedom from parental control. Monetary considerations, instead of the impulses of love, are for them the deciding factor in marriage. In the words of Pinky's grandfather, she is betrothed to "three banks and a brewery" (p.38). This kind of marriage, as Rishad calls it, "is just organised rape" (p.25). On the other hand, before she could recover from the terror of rape, Madhu's parents were bent on disposing her of in marriage, with "a tribal fanaticism" (p.95). Madhu fears the unknown face and hands of marriage to which they would deliver her. By embracing voluntary death, she attains a sort of deliverance. In contrast to Pinky, as Jasbir Jain observes,
"Skinny and Madhu are finely drawn and they are characters who grew in response to a situation." The marital disharmony between Usman and his wife, Nadira, is because of their inability to respond with body as well as mind in love. Pre-occupied with her own voluptuousness Nadira is more concerned with the physical side of marriage than with an exchange of ideas. But Usman needs a different kind of companionship - one involving receptivity to ideas. Hence his relationship with Devi is more satisfying. Nadira loves her husband and wants to reach him. On his part, Usman learns of his failure and blames himself:

Wherever he might have succeeded, with Nadira he had failed. May be she had created an Islamic fortress around her, imprisoned herself, a princess in a tower. But he had failed to reach her, and the failure was his. (p.137)

In the case of Devi in A Situation in New Delhi and Sonali in Rich Like Us their commitment to ideology proves to be stronger than their physical needs. Devi rejected Michael ten years ago for she thought she was

obliged to follow the ideals of Shivraj. In the midst of her grief now for Rishad she arranges for Michael's departure to finish his book. The novel which begins with Michael reading the announcement of Shivraj's death ends with his thinking about the immortality of Shivraj because his values are not dead. In fact, the statement that the resignations of Uman and Devi are "a confession of failure" and that the reader of *A Situation in New Delhi* is left with a feeling of futility is untenable. If one of the themes of the novel is the young washing away their youth, the depiction of the political struggle clearly outlines the theme of idealism and renunciation in a "situation" of power and its aggressive and inhuman formulations. If the sociological value of the novel lies in its treatment of the retreat from Gandhian values in the contemporary Indian society, the fictionalised experience presented in it stresses the value of a compassionate commitment to justice and moderation embodied in Shivraj.