Nayantara Sahgal’s Selected Works: Reflections of Indian History, Post-Colonial Politics and Change

An Abstract of the Thesis
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Nayantara Sahgal, one of the major Indian post-colonial writers, is hinged to history through the overlapping temporality of her life-period on a happening era, the genealogical circumstances of her birth, her academic inclinations as a student and literary engagements as a writer. Cradled in the lap of history, Sahgal watched the spectacle of the Indian Freedom Movement unveil in the courtyards of her family home, and grew up thinking that going to jail was a career. Endowed with a sharp critical acumen, imaginative sensibility and moral intelligence, the writer churned the abundant soaked-in impressions of landmark events in her mind to create a vast oeuvre of eighteen published works which includes nine of her well-acclaimed novels. Nurtured on the wholly lived-out political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and her maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, on a daily basis, the political overtones of almost every decade of the bygone century are encapsulated with scrupulous realism in her literary corpus.

In the past, while the gender issue, that is an intrinsic part of her humanism, had been isolated for heavy feminist criticism, her historical experience, political insights and literary response to the frenetic social change taking place in an inchoate nation have been inadequately treated. Even as a woman writer the critic has been wary of her famous genealogy and
overlooked her impeccable credentials as a unique literary artist. This research project traverses through the autobiographical, fictional and non-fictional works, as well as some addresses and interviews of Sahgal, to scrutinize them in the light of the new theoretical insights, to add fresh hermeneutic dimensions to the existing ones, by focusing on the historical and political framework of the creative works. It also examines her subtle posture as a veteran vanguard of contemporary cultural thought and vigilante of political practices in the context of her historical representations of Indian society.

In this era of concept subversion, philosophical adventurism and intellectual amateurism, inherently reactionary to prevalent versions of thought, each critical swing finds its terms of reference in the preceding and contemporary formulations of literary and cultural theory. An eclectic theoretical study cannot be envisaged without the interventions of the influential principles of “deconstruction” which have shaken the hinges of the conventional critical process, by “the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text.” Since equality, justice, asymmetrical application of power and multicultural proliferations, intellectually informed by deconstruction, are Sahgal’s primary thematic concerns, the imperativeness of post-structuralism to the study needs no emphasis. Further on, the critical theories conceptually informed by deconstruction, which are immensely relevant to the historical and political aspect of this study are new historicism, cultural materialism and postcolonialism. Focusing on the significant bearings of these schools of criticism, with their perceptual overlapping on the Derridean, Lacanian, Foucauldian, Saidian and Marxian thought, the project envisages re-locating the semantic terrain of interpretations of the works of Sahgal.

As Sahgal demystifies the vast labyrinth of the 20th century Indian politics within its historical framework, the subtle as well as the visible attendant change, spills out of the crevices
of her formidable fictional structure, calling attention to the directions new India had taken. As India has lived out its post-colonial phase and is on its paradoxical journey towards economic prosperity and cultural recovery, an exercise has been undertaken to juxtapose the nuances of post-colonial change portrayed in the writings of Sahgal with those of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Arundhati Roy.

Sahgal’s fiction has not penetrated the labyrinth of complexities in the aftermath of the economic reforms, and the information and technology boom (*Lesser Breeds* her last novel is the farthest removed from contemporaneity in temporal terms) and her non-fictional discourse tangentially touches upon the postmodern revolution ushered in by technology, sex, glamour, media and materialism. While the sudden transformation in the liminal decades of the previous century, and the on-going fluidity and incoherence in the cultural configurations has eluded her thematic concerns, Indian history and post-colonial politics have been deeply reflected upon and canonically fictionalized by Sahgal.