Introduction/Acknowledgements

My literary interface with Nayantara Sahgal began in the process of teaching a post-graduate literature course to students. As I delved into the hermeneutics of her fiction and read her later works on the sidelines, there was a gnawing sense of some significant aspects of her oeuvre deserving more attention than had been accorded to them. While the gender issue, that is an intrinsic part of her humanism, had been isolated for heavy feministic reading, her historical experience, political insights and literary response to the frenetic social change taking place in an inchoate nation were inadequately treated. In keeping with the zeitgeist of the 70s and 80s, most women writers had been appropriated by the feminist school of criticism - it appeared as if Sahgal mattered merely as a woman writer. Even as a woman writer, the critic has been wary of her famous genealogy and overlooked her impeccable credentials as a unique literary artist.

In the postmodern, postcolonial scenario the academic advantages of fitting into the monolithic construct of the "other" needs no over-emphasis. Be it that of gender, subalterns, tribals, labourers, blacks, dalits or any other marginalized group. As a result, a writer like Sahgal, who has been a child of privilege, has to struggle much harder to be audible and rightly interpreted - the deconstructive consciousness of the era ushers the author in with preconceived notions and reductionist judgements. In some aspects Sahgal’s thought process and clear prose style have a marked affinity, almost a family resemblance, with that of her maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, and in her adulation for him she has the concurrence of most coeval thinkers. Her lineage is special to her for its bounty of sparkling revolutionary ideas, schooling in pragmatism, gender equality and close-knit family ties, and not merely the coincidence of its elitist descent. The historical
framework of her inimitable literary corpus needs to be analyzed in depth to bring forth the harmonious synthesis of aesthetics and politics; the deep sagacity of prescience and ethics. The writer’s later works, *Rich Like Us, Plans for Departure, Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser Breeds* encapsulate Indian history, the three quarters of the previous century, with an insider’s insight into political configurations, economic repercussions and social responses. A perusal of the previous evaluative works leads to the belief that Sahgal has been better acclaimed by critics abroad than in India in addition to Indian universities, her works are included in the curriculum of universities in Australia, Britain and America.

It is likely that Sahgal’s writings have baffled critics to make her an easy prey of her ancestry, for hers is a rare instance of a creative writer, unapologetic about her collateral dynastic connections, having conviction and thrust. To a large extent, the works analyzed by feminist critics have been censured on the pretext of the exclusionist representation of the harrowing experiences of women from the affluent class. Very often, pain and alienation are assumed to be the prerogative of the lesser privileged woman. Any political reading of her texts has, more often than not, been beleaguered by an academic hostility to the fateful genealogy of her birth. Sahgal does not suffer from a false sense of modesty, that could in a writer be a guise for egomania and sociopathy. The strands of affiliation - class, religion, politics, culture, profession - have been adhered to; the writer does not make a pretense of disassociating from any of these; rather than shunning the dominant structure of her reality, Sahgal hammers it with wit, humour and irony. One of the absurd antinomies of a nation that is largely mesmerized by the mystique of the Nehru- Gandhi dynasty in the political arena - however ruthless or adventurous, unwilling and inexperienced the descendent be - is its skepticism towards an insightful intellectual of the very same clan.
For writers like Sahgal, Frantz Fanon, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, who were in their prime when the anti-colonial movements had reached their pinnacle in their respective nations, the freedom struggle embodied a mystique of sacrifice and passion for justice and equality. They witnessed the terrible beauty of dehumanized societies rising up in arms or armed with non-violence, to write the script of resistance to colonial exploitation, racism and apartheid, and to live out a history that exemplified courage, truth and awakening. There were great lessons which came out of the gravity of these struggles of simultaneous loss and achievement, and there was vibrant hope that the lessons would be taken.

In India, the midnight dream of 1947, pushed down by self-seekers to become a nightmare, has been rescued from time to time by its heroic citizens, and therefore, optimism and despair, celebration and censure, what went before and the yet to come, are the combined ingredients of Sahgal’s works. Ashis Nandy, Rohinton Mistry, Ramachandra Guha, Amitav Ghosh, and the other writers who evoke the post-colonial political predicament, have tried in their own ways to provide literary cushions of thoughts and ideas to the pitfalls of national consciousness. A sense of dystopia that pervades most of the early novels of Sahgal, set in the post-Nehruvian era, notably, This Time of Morning, Storm in Chandigarh, The day in Shadow and A Situation in New Delhi is corroborated by the writings of all prominent thinkers who committed themselves intellectually to the India-in-transition experience.

While the trend in Indian English fiction in the past few decades has been towards experimentation and specialization, and writers and filmmakers have zoomed in on to subcultures, subalterns, specific ethnicities and micro-societies, Sahgal has been constant in her trademark throwback style, focusing on the spread-out stories of paramount importance that shape India. The writer does not dream her characters into existence but
owes them to her sensitivity towards the real Indian experience. Without recourse to arcane, dense prose or attempts at newness of form, Sahgal’s fiction can be viewed as a means of coming to terms with the happenings around in a coherent, socially useful manner as a person and citizen. The recordings of social and political history of the nation are underpinned with depictions of capitalism crashing into a slow, unimaginative system creating a skewed economy, an out-of-control cultural whirligig, an identity based religious fundamentalism and a morally barren public service. Sahgal will remain guilty of charges of elitism until proved otherwise, and this project will examine the evolution of the writer to the enviable height of her achievement, to bring forth evidence of her humane, non-fragmentary vision.

For a more coherent articulation of ideas the dissertation has been divided into five sections dealing with various aspects of autobiography, theory, history, politics and change in the works of the writer. The first section studies the two autobiographies and the epistolary work in the light of the new critical insights in the autobiographical genre and explores the bearings of the personal interactions of the author with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru on her fiction. The second section puts forth the major tenets of post-structuralism, new-historicism, cultural materialism and post-colonialism in an effort to evolve an eclectic methodology primarily based on the ideas of Michel Foucault and Edward Said. Sahgal’s later texts have been re-read in the light of the new historiographic approaches that have emerged in the aftermath of the linguistic upheaval, for reflections of colonial/post-colonial history in the next section. The depiction of post-colonial politics in three of the early texts has been juxtaposed with contemporary works for a critical scrutiny in the fourth section. The last section is a comparative study of the author’s works with some relevant texts of significant writers like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Jawaharlal Nehru, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Arundhati
Roy, engaged with colonial/post-colonial predicament and change. An assimilation of the concept of nationalism and the changed position of the media in relation to Sahgal's works are also discussed in this section.

The historical period, marked by the hyphenated term, “post-colonialism” with a widely accepted reference to “after-colonialism” remains the nourishing ground for postcolonialism, the ideological discourse. Hence, throughout the work the hyphenated word “post-colonial” refers to the historical period after independence, and the word “postcolonial” carries the essence of theoretical percepts of the postcolonial school. Italics used within quotes, in totality at places, are retained from the original works.

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