Chapter III

Ethical Interventions through “Historiographic Metafiction”

Historical understanding is the exercise of the capacity to follow a story, where the story is known to be based on the evidence and is put forward as a sincere effort to get at the story.

(W.B. Gallie, Philosophy and the Historical Understanding)

Sahgal has the rare privilege of nurturing two strong connections with history, one umbilical and the other academic/literary. In addition to her lateral family ties with the Nehrus, it was the coincidence of her birth in the third decade of the 20th century with the eventful modern Indian history unfolding itself in her presence - that makes her identity as a writer unique. Sahgal has been an intelligent witness to the landmark events of the bygone era and is an involved intellectual of the present times. Graduation in the subject of History from Wellesley College in the US strengthened the writer’s intellectual capability and imaginative sensibilities with sharp historical insights. Sahgal’s case rests on a dash of destiny, natural potential, fortified academics and constructive critical skills; all lavishly drenched in the sweat of research and writing.

Her eighteen well-received publications, unobtrusively layered with history, politics, gender issues, cultural questions, topical engagements and discursive religion, lay out a narrative feast maintaining a constant touch with the reality of here and now. Without wasting words on abstract symbolism, Sahgal digs into her lived past to relate it to the present in various degrees of similitude, difference and comparison for the fruition of a meaningful future for mankind. Quite evidently, the framework of Sahgal’s fiction is compulsively historical, and this recall of the past to explain and inform the present is the author’s narrative effort to harness the past in the service of the contemporary human predicament. Her unfailing sense of history, her discerning consciousness of the politics of the age, put her
writing in a category of its own. A study of the seepage of this subliminal historical awareness into her fiction, to bring forth the complex interdependence of history and fiction is one of the aims of this project, and it proceeds cognizant of the idea of subjectivity of historical interpretation put forth in Jenkins’s statement: “All history is theoretical and all theories are positioned or positioning...” (83).

Many viewpoints have arisen in an effort to define history, to list its benchmarks, to arrive at some criterion distinguishing facts from fiction, but the question of interpretation of facts, in an age of linguistic paradoxes, has further complicated the issue. While the empirical historians consider facts as sacred and consider accuracy of facts as the end all of documenting history, the new scholars of history consider the belief in a “hard-core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian as a preposterous fallacy, which is hard to eradicate” (Carr 12). The imprint of individual interpreters, conditioned by the prevailing political and cultural conditions of their contemporary times, cannot be erased off any historical data that is passed over or recorded, which thus, makes history a sum total of multifarious thoughts and dominant discourses of that particular age, predetermined and pre-selected by the preceding generations. Referring to this present-time colouring of history the Italian thinker, Croce, enunciates a very clear philosophy in *History as the Story of Liberty*:

> The practical requirements which underlie every historical judgment give to all history the character of “contemporary history” because, however remote in time events thus recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate. (19)

The subjectivity versus objectivity of historical facts is an on-going debate amongst historians although it appears to be swinging more towards an inquiry mode of the selection and interpretation of historical events. The distinguished historian, E. H. Carr, rejects the
certainty of implicit meaning of facts through a memorable metaphor: *The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context* a fact is like a sack it won’t stand up till you have put something in it (11). So, the ball is now in the court of the historian who must rise to the occasion to make a constructive use of the past for the betterment of mankind. Quoting the Nietzschean principle that *the falseness of an opinion is not for us any objection to it* (sic). The question is how far it is self-furthering, life preserving, species-preserving, perhaps species-creating. Carr tries to sum up the complex nature of history as an inter-dependent continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past (30). Yet, the intermingling of the dichotomies of approaches in history - the conventional and the modern, the pragmatic and the philosophical, the empirical and the theoretical, the subjective and the objective - has kept this area of study in a state of flux generating a lot of interest from other disciplines as well.

With the subversion of all firmly entrenched traditional lighthouses of thought by the tide of the linguistic upheaval raised by structuralism and post-structuralism, the idea of the veracity of history in general has become debatable and the thought of objective history now seems an impossibility. While empirical historians, holding their ground, kept working for the status of a *science* for history, the recent theoretical developments have struck at the very foundation of its objectivity, making such claims an absurdity. A general postmodernist awareness about the pervasive impact of dominant discourses at any given point of time on the happening of events, and subsequently the representation and interpretation of these events as the past has raised doubts on the accuracy of historical recordings. The focus has now shifted from *knowing* the past to an *interrogation* of the representation of the past, thus challenging the notion of a possibility of replication and exactness in history as written by individuals. The fact that there is a play of untraceable and indefinable factors in the mind of
A historian, is gaining acceptance, as the famous theoretician of history, Louis Mink writes, “Where scientists note each other’s results, historians read each other’s books” (qtd. in Munslock 3).

Since the major cohesive force of historicism comes from empiricism, it cannot be discarded altogether. Its followers have reinvented themselves as new empiricists and continue to flourish, alongside the avant-garde cultural historians/theorists, by making a concession of opening up historical knowledge to multiple interpretations. The starkness of the notion of history as an epistemological tool in the service of power, and the unveiling of the subtleness of the ideologies that control the populace, have also raised the question of “subaltern” histories. This egalitarian effort seems to dethrone the kings and queens and their modern incarnates from their historical pedestals to bring the common people center stage.

Another significant offshoot, after the disintegration of conventional historical methodology, is the narrative school of constructionism, described as “metahistorical” by the famous American philosopher of history, Hayden White. White highlights the role of rhetoric in the recording, as well as interpretation of history, and argues that history is a literary artifact that is as much invented as found.

These experimental developments in the discipline of history, especially the understanding of history as a literary/narrative process, have a significant bearing on the works of Sahgal, for her writing, is primarily an aesthetic confluence of history and fiction. It will be fruitful to dwell on Alun Munslock’s book *Deconstructing History* wherein he has enunciated the linguistic turn that history has taken and discussed the relationship of history to its “closest neighbor” literature. The basic bonding between the two is of “referentiality” to the past, the variance being merely of manner and degree. The focus is now on the fact that the past, just like the present, is not lived out like a story but merely told as one. The selection, organization and the hermeneutics of the story-line bear the fingerprints of the
writer and operate within the subtle linguistic framework of the present times.

Acknowledging the literary and fabricated character of history, Munslow writes:

Because we cannot directly encounter the past, whether as a political
movement, economic process or an event, we employ a narrative fulfilling a
two-fold function, as both a surrogate for the past and as a medium of exchange
in our active engagement with it. History is thus a class of literature. (6)

In the debate between narration, and other criterion like evidence, truthfulness,
objectivity etc., the epistemological significance of the narrative structure of history is
considered at par with other yardsticks of creating historical knowledge. The historical
narrative as a collection of individual statements actually ends up being more than the sum. It
is a complex interpretative exercise that is neither conclusively true nor false, a
stylistic construct open to multiple interpretations, an answer that benefits from the raising of
questions and a story pregnant with many diverse stories. To get to the core of these
possibilities Munslow discusses the theory of tropes inspired by Hayden White’s book
Metahistory. White himself was impressed by the belief put forward by Roland Barthes in his
essay The Discourse of History that realism is just a discursive effect. The tropes or
figurative language operates at a very deep level of human thought and create meaning by
processing ideas through the binary concepts of similarity, difference, the relationship of part-
whole/whole-part and ambiguity. The description of historical processes can be better
comprehended by interpolating to cultural practices and studying the undercurrents of the
past by analyzing the stylistic devices of the narratives. To understand history as a by-product
of social discourse rather than as something over and above society, the role of the literary
aspect of language needs no emphasis. The four primary figures of speech: metaphor,
metonymy, synecdoche and irony which lie at the heart of the troping process have steered
the hermeneutics of history away from objective meaning based on evidence towards the
plethora of potential meanings waiting to be discovered according to different subjectivities. An intelligent historian is quick to deny the literal meaning of a text by remaining alert to the irony pervading through it. The theory of tropes falsifies all claims of the objective tethering of history leading to the production of scientific knowledge by laying bare its open-endedness, by focusing on its literary format and "emplotment" or story-line. History is more akin to literature than it is to science for it is narrated through the troping process which is a highly creative linguistic activity of the human mind.

Language as reflected upon by thinkers like Michel Foucault is "ideologically contaminated"; it is loaded with the self-reflexivities of writers, inevitably conditioned by their respective societies; it remains the collective growth of a medium of communication controlled by social and political forces operating in accordance with the institutions of authority, promoting their interests. A historian/ writer is consciously or unconsciously indulging in an ideological act by either supporting or challenging authority. He seeks self-legitimation and comprehension by his readers and is bound by the norms of his social reality. If, according to Foucault, "truth" itself emanates from power (disseminated not hierarchical) where else will language go for its evolution and enrichment but to power? Postmodern historians like White, influenced by the theoretical revelations, have vociferously de-sublimated the veracity of written history and have thrown light on the politics of historical interpretation by making metaphorical language and the narrative structure of history the thrust of their argument. While defining history as a "literary artifact" Munslow declares that there is "no more history in the traditional realist sense" and supports the challenge thrown to the traditional historical paradigms:

Deconstructionist history treats the past as a text to be examined for its possibilities of meaning, and above all exposes the spurious methodical aims and assumptions of modernist historians which incline them towards the
ultimate viability of correspondence between evidence and interpretation, resulting in enough transparency in representation so as to make possible their aims of moral detachment, disinterestedness, objectivity, authenticity (if not absolute truthfulness) and the objective constitution of historical facts allowing the sources to speak for themselves. (18)

Without getting into the precincts of fashionable arena of theory, Michael Dummett, gives a philosophy of historiography by the understanding of which, the idea of history cannot claim to be objective for the simple reason that the knowledge of the present has no bearing or effect upon it. Drawing analogies from pure mathematics, he argues with logical precision that a claim to being true (even of a speculative theorem in mathematics) can be raised to the status of a truth only if it is supported by verifiable evidence. As a matter of fact, even if historical truth were to stand the rigorous test of scientific proof it will always be bound by the limitations, like scientific truth, of the present level of human knowledge and information. The changing epistemologies may just prove the historical truth redundant. Therefore, its objectivity will remain subject to the cognitive ability of man at any given point of time. Being a realistic writer, Sahgal has faith in the knowledge which has got civilization so far, and she reinforces through her fictive narrative the lessons learnt on the human journey to the present.

In the face of the objectivity debate, a talk of veracity in the depiction of the histories of the colonized nations in Western archaeologies seems an absurdity. A kind of double whammy hits the concept of history the politics of imperialism complicates the ambiguities of language. The poetic lines of Derek Walcott I met history once, but he ain’t recognize me/A parchment creole( qtd. in Walder 23) raise the serious question of the nature and at times, even the presence of the colonized world in representations of Western history. Giving the example of the Indian Emperor Akbar, more powerful than any
European monarch of the time, a complete Renaissance man, Dennis Walder questions the hollow claims of Western writing that gives out for a fact that the inflexibility, weakness or ossification of these older feudal or slave-based empires brought European hegemony upon themselves (27). A large amount of literature coming out of the decolonized world of Africa, Asia and Latin America is a soulful effort at reclaiming the lost histories of its native people.

Post-independence arose a greater problem of re-writing Indian history, and the ongoing debate between secularism and ethnicity, the urge to revisit colonial history and subaltern histories, the issue of nationalism, and so on, posed a challenge to a progressive approach towards historiography. But the dilemma is not beyond resolution as Michael Gottlob explains:

It was only to be expected that, even during the period after the end of the colonial rule, the interpretation of history in India would not be exempt from attempts of political interference. There was, however, cause for hope that without the presence of a foreign power, political aspirations and cognitive claims could be related to each other in a more constructive, no matter how critical, way. (10)

Sahgal, through her pre-colonial, colonial, anti-colonial and post-colonial depictions of the past, which carry definable historical weight, is matchless for her ability to connect, the home-spun political and social realities to the coeval and causative global ideologies and events. It is noticeable that as a protégé of Nehru, Sahgal had been sensitized to the issue of the use of history for the infinite advancement of man.

With the polemical insights having turned history into a mystery, Sahgal has artfully fused the intrinsic dynamics of fiction and history, creating a sub-genre through her vast oeuvre which rests every inch on the bed-rock of history. Are her novels fictive narratives or historical narratives? Is Sahgal a literary-historian or a historian-novelist? The writer blends
the two disciplines so factually and imaginatively that it is, in fact, difficult to choose
between the two. The best of her novels are intrinsically laden with factual details,
chronological sequencing and historical insights and have an earthy realistic ambience, in
contrast to some adventurous historians like, Simon Schama indulging in flashback,
anticipation, punning, proleptic devices, who have been more innovative in the use of
fictional techniques than Sahgal. Linda Hutcheon in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*
calls such novels "historiographic metafictions." Three of Sahgal’s acclaimed novels, *Plans
for Departure, Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser Breeds* which incorporate large chunks of often
quite detailed and well-researched history, ‘real-life’ characters, socio-documentary material
(Norris 40) fall into this category. These novels will be focused on in this chapter for fresh
insights into the reflections of Indian history as captured in the writer’s imagination.

By giving a complete structure and strength to the hybrid, cross-over sub-genre of
History-Fiction in Indian postcolonial writing, Sahgal has actually raised the serious issue of
meaningful realist literature versus "purist" theories. No one can claim to know the past; each
narrative account of it has the ingredient of fiction as the deconstructionists claim, yet matters
need not rest finally with "textuality." In the case of Sahgal, it is fiction which sprouts from
the fertile grounds of history, part of which actually, is an imaginatively interpreted, lived
experience. Writing in the humane critical tradition, keeping to the familiar segment of the
anti-colonial/colonial elite, her fiction covers wide ranging events of 20th century
colonial/post-colonial history and throws light on diverse view-points ensuing from these
incidents. Being privy to the significant backstage happenings and as an involved spectator of
the front-stage historical drama, her witty fictional critiques bear the dignity of a veteran
crusader and the masterly strokes of a mellow artist.

"Textuality has become the exact antithesis and displacement of what might be
called history" writes Edward Said in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (3). While agreeing
in principle with White that there is no way to get past the text to arrive at the real history, Said warns against succumbing to the rut of meaninglessness on the pretext of the eternal anonymity of the linguistic matrix. Said laments the essential theoretical unmindfulness to circumstantial reality and human sensitivity in the process of studying the text and takes a scathing dig at the underlying paradox of the theory that has changed academic procedures: 

Textuality is considered to take place, yes, but by the same token it does not take place anywhere or any time in particular. It is produced by no one and at no time. It can be read and interpreted, although reading and interpreting are routinely understood to occur in the form of misreading and misinterpreting. The striking similarity between Said and Sahgal is their emphasis on lived human predicaments, repercussions of political applications and a zest for the up-liftment of the human race as a whole. Remaining politically vigilant, Said played his part as a literary critic and Sahgal as a novelist. The affinity of the Sahgalian thought with the Saidian viewpoint will be taken up at length in chapter V.

As mentioned earlier, for the purpose of discussing the encompassing reflexivity of the historical angle in Sahgal’s fiction, three novels have been selected. The three works under purview, Plans for Departure, Mistaken Identity and Lesser Breeds were published in the same order i.e. in 1986, 1988 and 2003 respectively, and coincidently refer to successive decades of colonial Indian history in the same linear sequence. Primarily set in the year 1914, Plans for Departure refers to the historical events of the first two decades of the 20th century, capturing the magical influence of the writings of Bal Gangadhar Tilak on the exploited Indians against the background of Europe’s internal bleeding in the first Great War. Ensconced specifically in the revolutionary events and their repercussions during the volatile period between 1929 and 1932, Mistaken Identity broadly refers to the political history of India and the world in the 1920s and 1930s. It treats with brilliance the rise of early fascism in Italy, the civil war in Turkey and the Khilafat movement, the parallel rise of the Gandhi,
Marx and the Bhagat Singh brand of nationalisms. Moving further on towards the twilight years of the British Empire in India, *Lesser Breeds* focuses on the indelible historical imprints left by the crucial events of the late 30s and the 40s. This ambitious fictional epic of history captures the urgency and the turmoil of mankind’s most record-worthy plunges and decisions, cascades over the rough and the smooth of the past and lays forth prophetic insights of its future. Clearly, these three novels form a trilogy on colonial Indian history; they also fold alongside, its inevitable connection with world history. This fictional lattice, covering almost the first half of the 20th century, will be scrutinized to trace the well-nuanced reflections of colonial/post-colonial history keeping in mind the new critical developments in History and Literature.

I

*Plans for Departure*

Who could say where myth ended and history began?

*(Plans for Departure 45)*

*Plans for Departure* is a romance-mystery fore-grounded against historical realities of the Indian freedom movement and the First World War and it opens straight into the apprehensive, uncertain year of 1914 covering a quarter of it in its immediate range. The ethereal romance, the spiritual highs and the metaphysical meanderings of the story are firmly entrenched in the colonial condition of injustice, slavery, exploitation, racism and the simmering discontent about to boil over. Slow on action and intense on reflection as some of Sahgal’s novels, the story unfolds through the perceptions and reactions of characters from four different nationalities — Dutch, Indian, British and American. Miss Anna Hansen, is a Danish woman, who has taken a year off for travel before her marriage to an English diplomat, Nicholas. On her arrival in Calcutta from Denmark, she is employed as a governess to an aging bachelor, Sir Nitin by his doting elder sister. Sir Nitin, a Bengali botanical
scientist, for the purpose of his research had taken up temporary residence in an almost inaccessible hill-station of Himapur, in the lap of the Himalayas. The enigmatic presence of the district collector, Henry Brewster in, and the mysterious unexplained absence of his wife, Stella, from Himapur, provides the requisite mystification in the story’s their ambivalent relationship symbolizes the conflict within British colonialism. To this political setting Sahgal, has added a dimension of crass commercialism in the loud character of Lucille Croft, an English planter’s estranged daughter, incongruously married to an American missionary, Marlowe Croft. Madhav Rao, a local shop-keeper cum photographer cum revolutionary is a complete anti-thesis to the titled high profile Indian, Sir Nitin Bose. Robert Prior, the home secretary to the government of the United Province is the unabashed ugly face of imperialism. The story swings to the year 1961 towards the end, connecting it to the postcolonial realities, with Anna’s grandson-in-law, Jason, working on a conference paper on Tilak’s leadership of the Congress party. The success of the novel is a testimony to the interest generated by the mythic potential of the Indian freedom struggle across nationalities and boundaries in present times.

The title, “Plans for Departure” resonates with the various nuances of meaning the well-layered story generates. Apparently it is Anna and Sir Nitin who must plan their departure on the completion of the stipulated three month period of their stay in Himapur. Anna must then return to the war-ridden spaces of Europe and her awaiting fiancé, Nicholas. But the elaborate departure of Stella Brewster with her daughter Jennie from the hill town, after her break-up with her bureaucrat husband, leaving behind some mysterious trails in the form of the exhumed corpse of her spaniel, Juliet, is a constant reference point in the tale too. Yet another departure is clandestinely being planned by Lulu Croft after she is driven to the edge by the obsessive missionary zeal of her husband, Marlowe. Lulu’s plan of departure does not reach fruition due to her permanent departure from earth, shrouded in mystery. The
most significant call for departure comes from the sane voice of the anti-colonial characters, Anna Hansen and Henry Brewster. The hushed tones of the revolutionaries, under the local leadership of Madhav Rao, too seem to be reaching a crescendo. The first popular leader of the Indian Independence Movement, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak had arrived. The time was up and it was the British Empire, which ironically needed to plan its departure.

The inspirational flame of the novel is Tilak, whose towering presence is felt throughout the story, in his impact on Indians and non-Indians alike. The ideological conflict in the story can be traced to the famous Muzzafarpur murder attempt in 1908, on the life of Chief Presidency Magistrate, Douglas Kingsford of Calcutta fame. Two Bengali youths threw a bomb on a carriage, erroneously killing some women traveling in it. One of the boys committed suicide while the other was hanged. Making a strong demand for Swaraj (self-rule), Tilak defended the two revolutionaries in his paper Kesari. He was tried for sedition, sentenced to six years of rigorous imprisonment and spent the period from 1908 to 1914 in Mandalay prison in Burma under difficult circumstances and poor health. The bomb throwing incident, thinly camouflaged by fictionalizing the participant’s name to Khudiram Bose, is almost precisely narrated by Madhav Rao to Anna: Unfortunately his bomb killed the wrong people, an English lady and her daughter instead of Mr. Kindford, the sessions judge of Muzzafarpur. Both drove in identical green carriages drawn by white horses (56). The echoes of this incident are fictionally recorded in Henry Brewster’s reminisces of the execution of Khudiram, as the beginning of his alienation from his wife. Being the District Magistrate of that particular area, he was ritually duty bound to be present for the hanging while Stella insisted on attending it for vengeful sadistic reasons: I’ll go to this hanging if I were on my death-bed. It’s the least I can do. This is the animal who killed Mrs. Kennedy and her daughter (70). While Stella sat stoically throughout the ordeal impervious to the crowd
of hundreds who cheered the condemned man. Henry, in sharp contrast stood sweating in his appointed place, a symbol of authority, questioning the authority he was exercising.

The dialectical correlation between imperialism and national freedom forms the crux of the story - if the 19th century colonial history was the history of the imperial appropriation the 20th century anti-colonial movements are about reclaiming power and control (Young, Postcolonialism 4). The text substantiates the rise of radical nationalism with Tilak (militancy not mendicancy) - his opposition within the Anglicized Congress, his complete rejection of the slow legislative and treaty signing process, his demand for not a slice but whole loaves of bread, the famous trial when he boldly advocated his own case of sedition in the Bombay High Court, his severe imprisonment of six years to put an end to the bomb-throwing mentality on the rise, his emaciated form on return, the thunderous nationwide welcome and his influence on the national leaders including Mahatma Gandhi form the backdrop of the story. Sir Nitin, the wittily caricatured protégé of Anna, recollects the speech he gave at the Bombay session of the Congress in 1885 which is symptomatic of overt sycophancy practised by the Anglicized elite Indians of the times:

> Let us speak like men and proclaim that we are loyal to the backbone (cheers)
> that we thoroughly appreciate the education that has been given to us, the new light which has been given to us, turning us from the darkness of Asiatic despotism to the light of free English civilization.

(25). He compares this session to the tremulous session of 1907 when the organization's high oratorical standards were brought down by shouts for agitation and ridicules Tilak by saying:

> He said he believed in passive resistance and called his strategy boycott, but every time he opened his mouth, someone else got ready to throw the bomb. When he made it clear the government did not suit him, it was certain not to suit a few others as well, bomb throwers among them.

(25). Anna, mesmerized by the charged atmosphere of revolution had, of
course, made up her mind in favour of the legendary vanguard, judging from the letter she wrote to Nicholas:

Dearest Nicholas I was deeply moved by the meeting for Tilak. There must be something extraordinary about the man who can set these woods ablaze, so far from Delhi, and after so many years’ absence. His wife died while he was in prison. But to make up for his personal loss, his national family has grown enormously. He has had a hero’s welcome on his return. I sat at the meeting Nicholas, not understanding a word, yet understanding it all. (143)

The changing face of the Congress, its more assertive and aggressive modus operandi, the mass awakening of the national consciousness are the diffusive fallouts of Tilak’s extraordinary leadership skills as visible in this literary recall of his life. In the true Marathi manner literature remained a passion with Tilak, in his journey from a professor of Mathematics to a freedom mongering journalist and further on to a national icon. His daring initiative in editing the patriotic papers, Kesari and Maratha demanded exemplary courage and his memorable slogan “Swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it” has filled generations of freedom seekers with courage and determination. The novelist has included historical documents at a number of places in the natural flow of the story and his reaction in the court to the pronouncement of the verdict “guilty” to his plea of innocence, is a small example of his greatness: “here were higher powers ruling destiny, he said, and it might be the will of Providence that his cause would prosper more by his suffering than his acquittal.” (58). The British jury arbitrarily interpreted the lawful right of writing as an “explosion.”

Henry Brewster after having read the article in the Kesari reasons out with Robert Pryor, “Frankly it didn’t sound seditious to me” (72) but expectedly to no avail. Anna lays her hands on an autobiographical script of Tilak written in the Mandalay prison in Brewster’s library, excerpts of which are included in the text. His philosophical interpretation of the
Bhagavad-Gita, *Gita Rahasya*, the manuscript of which lay with the government after his return, was another ‘caged lion awaiting release’. When Anna wonders about the fate of this commentary which cannot be called seditious because it has nothing to do with politics, Madhav Rao explains, ‘Tilak has made the Bhagavad-Gita seditious before he ever went to jail’. If you are changing the world and the English judges and jury are not liking the change, it is sedition. In any case the trouble starts with the Gita itself. Sri Krishna is standing on a battlefield. He orders ‘Fight!’ Tilak is fanning the flames by saying that Realized people must forget about sitting and meditating in caves (124). Tilak was a much mellowed leader in the later stage of his life but this novel draws attention to his inspirational role in awakening the sluggish spirit of his countrymen through religion and political motivation, and building up a national movement to fight the British rule.

Tilak was denounced by the British as the ‘Father of the Indian unrest’. All over India a whisper campaign against the rulers got rolling and secret meetings were held in which ‘reliable old formulas like boycott, militant struggle, and Home Rule flew like sparks from the podium, catching fire as the audience echoed and applauded them’ (136). When in England regarding a libel case he had brought up against an English writer Valentine Chirol for his book *Indian Unrest*, Tilak quite predictably lost the case, but struck a chord with Ramsay Macdonald, the leader of the Independent Labour Party. The Labour party gave him a platform to address workers from Glasgow to Southampton and he was introduced from the stage as “the very embodiment of the spirit of resistance which is manifest in India today” (202). Funds were raised for Tilak in India with the help of Mahatma Gandhi out of which he presented a cheque of two thousand pounds to his political hosts. Changing his strategy, he sought support for the British forces in World War I, electrifying public meetings sometimes with the result of as many as eight hundred and fifty men joining on the spot—all in the hope of freedom for his motherland. When Jason, Anna’s grandson-in law, starts a research project
on Tilak in 1961, his wife Gayatri, dampens his spirit by saying that the era he had chosen
was far from interesting and a non-starter:

Tilak had just come out of jail and the rest of them were just passing glorious
resolutions while he was behind bars, and nothing like a real national
movement had got started. There hadn’t been a ghost of a peasant or a worker
on the political horizon until later. (144)

The crux of the novel is contained in Jason’s reply to his wife’s skepticism: “Nothing would
have turned out as it did afterwards if these particular things hadn’t happened before — the
stooge being a stooge [Sir Nitin], the D.M. lending your Gran books...” (144)

Shyamala A. Narayan, a leading scholar on Sahgal, mentions some of the less
sympathetic critics labeling Plans for Departure as a “backdated Jewel in the Crown” - an
evaluation that is visibly superficial on a close scrutiny of the make-up and selection of the
characters, the din of anti-colonial speeches in the background and the complex amalgam of
political sentiments floating in the Himapur atmosphere. Clearly, according to Sahgal, the
fight for justice and freedom can rise above the racial and national barriers and is all about an
inclination for humane causes and political sagaciousness. A visiting Danish lady, Anna, and
the District Magistrate, Brewster, relate to the plight of the suffering masses far better than
Sir Nitin, the Bengali scientist who has been conferred knighthood by the British
government. Within the British community, there is Robert Pryor, a senior bureaucrat and
Stella Brewster, later Stella Pryor, who unreasonably take rebellion to be an insult to the
imperial authority — an authority they take so much for granted. In an obvious contrast to the
“stooge”, Sir Nitin, there is Madhav Rao, a small store-keeper, who risks much to hold
patriotic meetings inspired by the philosophy of Tilak and to secretly distribute the copies of
the Kesari and Marathi. The commercial interests of the Britishers are represented by the
merciless, murderous conglomerate of planters which victimizes the tenants on the
plantations to death, and it includes Lucille’s father, Mr. Firth. The most hypocritical face of redemption in the novel is an American missionary, who is absolutely crazed by the idea of setting up a church in Himapur, and is the probable murderer of his wife, Lucille. A resonating title, a multi-racial cast with unpredictable inclinations, the ineluctable presence of Tilak’s ideology and the undercurrents of the nationalistic fervour do not make for good components of a backdated Jewel in the crown. In the trademark Sahgalian sense, Plans for Departure reflects the hopes and fears of the political scenes held out to us at a given point of time.

The juxtaposition of Pryor and Stella as egotistical imperial bigots against the humane and rational Brewster and Anna, all four Westerners, depicts the broad-mindedness of the narrator’s political vision where support for liberty comes liberally, irrespective of barriers and boundaries. Stella’s marriage with Brewster doesn’t work because of the incompatibility in their political views with Stella groomed to a colonial mindset which was quite naturally drawn to the parochialism of Pryor. He is selfishly overwhelmed by the difficulties his countrymen went through to establish the Empire and feels completely justified in using coercion to maintain its glory and is wary enough of the subversive design of the natives to emphasize, Don’t lose sight of the fact these are violent people. We have won India by the sword. I hope the tiny educated class which the Congress represents, will have the intelligence to realize its best hope is with us, and the British sword stand between it and the rest of the native population(30). Stella’s transformation to Pryor from Brewster is not a matter of her moral decline but an obvious corollary of her upbringing by her father who was an irredeemable colonial despot. In a rare breach of reticence Brewster sadly describes to Anna the values his former wife was nourished on:

Stella was a soldier’s daughter and granddaughter and had been brought up on the Mutiny legend and lore. The Peshawar uprising of June 10, 1857, was one
of his favorite after dinner stories. It had been simple prudence, he said, to take forty of the hundred and twenty prisoners taken, and blow them from cannons as an example to the rest. No one pretended it was civilized, but which ultimate deterrent was? The Moghuls had blown prisoners from cannons, and Moghul punishment had a big revival after the mutiny. Mutineers had been branded with red hot irons, bayoneted in the face, burnt alive, and shot in batches of ten pinioned together. We didn’t invent any of it Henry, and it did allow for a quick disposal of a vast number of prisoners. (178)

Unlike Brewster, Stella stubbornly refused to sense the change that was happening all around her and remained fixed in her racist view of the Eastern people as barbarous savages who needed to be kept in constant awe of the ruling government. As much as Brewster loved Stella he could not change her. Sahgal has penned down historical truths with admirable transparency and objectivity without succumbing to a biased absolutism and generalities about races. As a matter of fact the writer has rejuvenated hope in an age of East/West divide by portraying exceptional characters on both sides - Sir Nitin Bose is a stooge amongst the Indians and Brewster is a traitor amongst the Britishers. That Sir Bose evolves into Nitin Bose by the end of the novel, having given up his Knighthood in protest against the Jallianwala massacre, is a vindication of what Brewster had silently endorsed with his unease.

Brewster is a benign face of imperialism. With his annoying capacity to make a case for the foxâ€”his posting to Himapur was not a punishment. It was, in fact, a favour to anyone who had suffered malaria five times, suffered from philosophy, and had chronic attacks of ruling class conscience.(28). The departure of Stella’s luggage caravan evokes prophetic images in the DM’s mind, of the British leaving India bag and baggage in twenty-thirty years’ time or however long it took for Robert Pryor and company to come up against the question of what they were doing here at all in 1914, so long after the real and rousing
relationship had ended (36). He symbolizes a voice of sanity lost in gloom, desertion, suspicion and finally nihilistic participation and death in World War I. He strongly felt that the British government should have been planning to phase itself out, and passing acts of conviviality meanwhile, instead of riot acts (6). For no explicable reason his gaunt, tall, lonely frame lost in his deep thoughts in the residency in Himapur reminds Anna of Tilak, serving his rigorous imprisonment in Mandalay prison - the connection is of course, of compassion for humanity, and the difference between the two is that of somber contemplation as opposed to productive action.

The superstructure of imperialism is founded on the ideology of power. Brewster’s attitude towards this ideology is crucial to the understanding of the political changes that took place in the previous century. Robert Pryor the chief whip of the colonial power in the story has this to say about Brewster, “A capable man, one of our best but he never did understand the ideology of rule” (206). Anna, who seems to have fallen in love with a complete vision rather than just a man, looks back to analyze years later, “There is this anti-imperialistic side of Henry I will always admire... He is a man ahead of his generation” (191). Having initially been keen on a career in politics, Brewster’s attitude as a British bureaucrat did not go well with the top brass who thought his reasoning was flawed. Instead of falling in line with his compatriots he wrote cautious creeds recommending policy changes, suggesting everyone was not an assassin and the whole population could not be treated with suspicion. He implied the heart of the matter was an equal relationship, and it would only come with mixing [of races] (71). The marked softness and understanding that he brought into his role as an administrator historicizes the morality of all the British officers who subverted the egotistical postures they were supposed to live out as representatives of authority.

Sahgal’s unique historiography of politics has strong undercurrents of ethics. The writer does not let the politician forget that he is primarily human and highlights the humane
lives of those who don’t. Judging Brewster by his sympathetic discursion of authority Anna mentions to Nicholas Wyatt in one of her initial letters, “Henry Brewster is a mould breaking man, but as the imperial mould is not likely to break, I should call him a mould cracker instead. Quite some cracks he has made, mainly by being informal and friendly.” The missionary’s wife, Lulu flays him as a pen-pushing D.M., “spouting about tenants’ rights, local feelings, and all that tommyrot, just because he wants Croft not to mess with the religious feelings and compulsions of the natives. For Anna, who represents the authorial voice, “Croft had religion. But it was Brewster who made her think of candles, incense, altars, and the brooding vaults of great cathedrals.” A bit disillusioned with how the seat of authority treats the just and the fair, Brewster himself reinforces his commitment to the cause of the down-trodden, “If the best behaved of us are supposed to be sinners, how do I rate divine grace? I am better qualified to join the desperate. I have the required amount of zeal for the wrong causes.” Comparing Croft and Brewster, Anna reverses their roles in a laconic but a telling statement, “It is odd that he looks like a priest and the beefy missionary, like an empire builder.”

An inherent agenda of cultural imperialism in India was the propaganda of Christianity, a proselytizing mission apparently aimed at taming the spirit of barbarianism and tackling the evil off-shoots of Hinduism. Through the actions of Marlowe Croft, the local missionary, Sahgal has unveiled the ugly motives behind church-building and conversions to Christianity. Although the 1858 proclamation by Queen Victoria prohibited any intervention in the religious beliefs of the colonized subjects, the matter was taken care of only at a political level while the authorities closed their eyes to the proselytizing hordes that descended on the land. Actually the church was an “expression of white solidarity and the quaking post mutiny spirit needed constant repair,” but the matter under focus is the obsession to build a church with such avidity for poor native souls. Anna walking back with
Croft, after he had showed a site for the prospective church to the D.M., reasons out with him that India was such an old country with staggering religions, “Whatever else it needed, it did not need one more religion” (51). But Croft remained firm as ever in his missionary zeal as he reminded his skeptical wife threateningly, “The church will be built, and no mistake. I’ve staked my life, my very soul on it. In time this will be a Christian land. It took centuries to Christianize the Scandinavians, though they were Europeans like us. I’ll do it here. I’ll make something out of nothing” (81).

When the locals meet the D.M. to protest against the teaching of Christianity to their children, Brewster reminds Croft of the ghastly consequences of showing disregard for religious sentiments in 1857 and ordered the couple to stop intervention in the local custom and religion. He reminds Lulu of her Christian Endeavour class which she tries to camouflage as a singing, dancing and clapping class and protests in her typical manner of outrage by questioning why Anna’s sun saluting is not being dismissed. Dwelling on the bizarre marriage of two diametrically opposed nuisances - planters and missionaries - Brewster good humouredly relates the fear of British authorities to such oddities, “If Robert Pryor needed an omen of disaster, it was much more likely to be lurching in this unlikely couple than Tilak, who after all would only hasten history” (31). The Brahmanical mind was questioning why A.D. was being used in school text books instead of A.C., and Brewster, in a deeply reflective mood admits his immersion into the Indian thought, “If I am ever driven to belief, it will have to be Madhav Rao’s law of moral consequences, which catches up, as it has with me” (131).

The crass commercialism of the foreign planters of indigo was a law unto itself. Through Lulu’s childhood experience and the immediate beating of a tenant to death, Sahgal raises the veil on the orgy of cannibalism which was a routine matter on the plantations. The planters forced their unjust terms and conditions on the workers through their hired toughies
while the magistrate dithered with the law. Lulu remembered routine thrashings of the tenants from her perch on the saddle, while riding with her father, Mr. Firth in the plantation - while the worker got on to sowing, her father cracked the whip on the horse’s hind quarters and got back to clowning with his daughter without any qualms. There were practiced murderers amongst Mr. Firth’s fraternity, whose forerunners had organized volunteer hanging parties and enthusiastic execution squads after the mutiny(41). The authorities rarely caught up with their subhuman brutal blood sport. Not far from the Firths, two planters had tied a syce to a tree and flogged him to death. Later all the planters got together, collected a thousand pounds for the defense of the murderers and got them off with three years’ simple imprisonment. Touching upon these rarely mentioned colonial details, Sahgal brings into literature the substantiality of the lived reality, the weight of the historical experience in her unique realistic manner.

Exploitation of resources and wealth was not limited to the poor. The pound of flesh was exhorted from the wealthy in various suitably devised ways. Sahgal has fictionalized through a party tête-à-tête one such protocol invented by the British ladies to satisfy their vanity by pressuring the host/hostess to part with a valuable jewelry item or any other heirloom as a part of the exercise of entertaining the colonial guest. Delicate hints about the parting gifts by a certain Lady Governor had left gaping holes in the vaults of rajas and maharajas. While the eleven-gun-salute maharajas who had less to part with had panicked and taken to burying their treasure and forgetting where it was, in the hope that sons and grandsons, and other irregular but well-loved off-springs would find it one day(92), a hilarious trick played by a twenty-one gun salute maharaja of Jainagar, on the swooning lady governor, saved his egg sized emeralds from getting gift-wrapped on a parting train. Keeping the gift as a Surprise-i-i-se the clever host handed over a decorated casket to the A.D.C. on the moving train out of which sprang a poodle. The incorporation of such anecdotes
crystallized from memory, folklore and historical archives, handled with easy wit, lend
Sahgal’s historical fiction the freshness of sparking imagination. The Time magazine received
the first publication of the novel with an appraisal not easy to refute: “The mention of a
revolution or religion can clear a bookshop fiction aisle faster than a fire alarm… But with a
chilly wit and metaphysical calm, Nayantara Sahgal has mastered the difficult task” (Book
Jacket, Plans for Departure).

Sahgal moulds romance, mystery, irony and wit in her fiction to fit into the structural
layout of historical reality and endeavours to convey her perceptions of it as closely as she
has experienced them. For Sahgal history is not merely a documentation of treaties passed or
laws enforced; it is the creation of patterns of life from human interactions as lived out every
day. Anna Hansen is one such lived experience of Sahgal’s life, a pleasant autobiographical
strand of the novel. In her effervescent memoir, Prison and Chocolate Cake the writer
mirthfully notes:

Anna Ornsholt came into our family. She was a tall, slim, erect Dane, with iron-
gray hair, blue eyes, a smooth, unlined rose and tan complexion, and a swinging
stride… Tanta Anna became an institution in our lives. Tante Anna was
contemptuous of people who did not do things for themselves… Sit up! Walk
Straight!…she was always commanding us. How will India ever be free if you
young people always sit hunched up?… Tanta Anna brought harmony and
happy discipline into our hitherto disturbed lives… She had come to India before
any of us had been born, to become a confirmed theosophist and later to work as
secretary to Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose, the celebrated natural scientist… people
never ceased to be amazed at her abundant store of energy… The European
community in town was convinced that she was mad. (71–72)
Anna Hansen, with minor structure-related locational and temporal changes in her Indian sojourn, is essentially etched out from the fond associations and childhood memories of the author. Apart from the sobriquet, Tante Anna and her characteristic description, an unambiguous coincidence is her working as the house-keeper of a botanical scientist and her having studied history and culture at Adyar due to her interest in Hindu doctrines and philosophy. Absorbing the impressions of human interactions and natural experiences of Himapur like a sponge, Anna by herself is not the cause or effect of the happenings there. In the portrayal of Anna’s benign unusual personality and in the expression of her bold amicable views, the narrator’s deep sense of gratitude to the positive Western influences in her life get imprinted on the literary sands. Other than Anna’s mysteriously evolving affection/sympathy for Brewster, it is the transformation that Anna subtly brings about in the attitude of Sir Nitin Bose which is of particular interest to the subject of this study.

Robert J. C. Young has countered the claims of modernity theorists as he argues: Colonialism may have brought some benefits of modernity but it has also caused extraordinary suffering in human terms and was singularly destructive with regard to indigenous cultures (Postcolonialism 6) and this is what Sahgal has tried to portray. Sir Nitin Bose was so proud of the Christian-Western influences that had hovered about his family ever since he could remember, and made modern, enlightened Indians of them (Plans for Departure 13) and greatly admired the European mania for establishing institutions that would outlast them (157). An innocuous strain of sarcasm runs through the portrayal of his character. Although his experiments in plant tissue had kept him away from politics he cherishes the memory of his speech in the inaugural session of the Indian National Congress in 1885, which he had carefully rehearsed in front of the bath-room mirror. Sir Nitin and his family are caricatured as servile products of Western education system, meticulously nurtured by the colonizers to speak their language. His worshipping Mr. Gladstone, one of the
foundational members of the Congress, as the greatest statesman of modern times is an act of political amateurishness. He represents the Indian elite that, slain by the niceties of cultural imperialism, enamored by a "superior" race, enacted out the hypocrisies of the English mannerism and foolishly believed in the false promises of the Britishers:

The Indian princes were England’s allies; the Indian people were freeborn equal subjects under the Crown. Solemn charters and statues guaranteed it. In this ideal, intoxicating relationship the sovereign showed love, care and sympathy for India, and Indian hearts beat with devotion to the British throne. Enfranchisements and autonomy were around the corner. India’s sons would soon sit in the councils of Empire to govern and guard it as perfect equals. (162)

Gayatri recollects India’s days of absolute gullibility and sycophancy, and the myth-making tendencies of power when she says to Jason that some of the leading lights believed "God Himself had stretched out his right hand and placed the Empress’s crown on Victoria’s head" (170). Sir Nitin’s belief in the slow majestic forces of progress under the grand and glorious British, tickle Gayatri enough to say that unlike her Granma she would have laughed herself into a coma had she been there (142). The reader gets a sense that history is ridiculing the scientist who had quarantined himself from the change happening around by immersing himself in botanical research. Staying under the same roof is Anna who understands the cause of the wretched as her own.

Sir Nitin, in his complete disregard for the past of his ancient land, is unable to comprehend the reasons why Anna was delving deep into Indian history when the dawn of civilization which was rising on the Indian soil under the patronage of the British was all that she needed to know about India. Almost disowning his martial heritage, Sir Nitin, as he liked to be called, is irked by Anna studying the "unscientific" Ancient Indian history when no book he’d read about the obscure beginnings of Indian history had any objective evidence of
the ‘Aryans astride their dreaded horses trampling everything in sight\(\) (44). What he mistakes as his scientific temper is actually a tendency of the servile to glorify the colonial power. He is all ready to wear the new garb by severing his ties from a civilization older than antiquity, \(\) time to stop fighting and killing and to see our gods for what they are, hard-drinking, war mongering, swaggering fellows, greedy for spells and sacrifices. We’ve got to get rid of them\(\) (47). Anna, who is a religious freethinker, goes on to teach Yoga to a class of children and cannot be coerced into the mission of the church by the Crofts and enjoys her stay in the ‘back of beyond Himalayan abode, discussing spirituality with a Brahman, Madhav Rao. When Sir Nitin informs her of his reformed religious background, with his family members being the founder members of the Brahma Samaj, and also the founders of the first Western style college in Calcutta, Anna is not impressed for she remarks, ‘so what\(\) all the hoo-ha about reform. They might as well call themselves second-class Christians and be done with it\(\) (110). Years later, Sir Nitin is nicknamed the ‘stooge by progeny; contrarily, Anna is imbued with a soldierly spirit of a ‘Valkryie from the Norse myth, in the deep thoughts of Henry Brewster.

The two have divergent views on Hinduism, Indian literature, English language, Tilak, British Royalty or other related colonial matters. Every time Anna addresses him as ‘Sir Bose\(\) she is without fail reminded of the correct form ‘Sir Nitin\(\) which she cheerfully tells her protégé is ‘meaningless like some of the English ways and adds, to remind him of the other unscientific idiosyncrasies of his esteemed language, including the English spelling (15). The juxtaposition of the two, the ‘Valkryie and the ‘Stooge is a satirical masterstroke by Sahgal, which exposes the ludicrousness of ‘Sir through subtle strokes of contrast. Sir Nitin is absolutely flabbergasted to learn from Anna that the Danish Queen goes shopping for her vegetables on a bike when for him the epitome of power was Queen Mary of England, with a ramrod straight back, ‘achieved with backboard practice for growing bones, and whale
corsets in maturity – a carriage that represented the empire itself, its discipline, its standards. The strength of colonialism rested on the symbolic erectness of the unquestionable stiff royal posture, a truth that the busy scientist of plants refused to perceive.

The hypocrisy of Sir Nitin’s attitude towards life has been exposed through gentle humour and ridicule. He had conducted experiments on plants to prove their sensitivity to time, cruelty, kindness, pain, harsh conditions, uprooting etc. and made a mark as a scientist for the uniqueness of his ideas. Although he was honoured for the originality of his ideas, no botanists was convinced enough to stop boiling peas for meals in order to prevent torture to the useful vegetable. It is in the contrast of his treatment of the flora and fauna that his deep sensibilities as a human being get revealed. While he remains all wrapped up in the mimosa’s hangover or the carrot’s nervous breakdown, Anna remembers the shrieking flurry die down to a croak as the cook wrung a chicken’s neck (164). The staple food in the house was beef, mutton or chicken when all the time Sir Nitin took preaching the gospel of kindness towards plants as seriously as Croft took his missionary church. The incongruous duality of thought or the ethical double standards that he maintained are in line with his highly Anglicized Indian identity. When all of India was simmering with anger against discrimination and injustice, Anna wittily traces the causes of his political smugness to his diet, Meat and potatoes every day is not the best for revolutionary thinking (117).

His interaction with Anna helped him to realize his life for the paradox it was - a human inexperience. This indifference to the political condition of his compatriots began to wither away gradually and by 1919, in the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the transformation was complete. He changed from Sir Nitin to Nitin Bose by giving up his knighthood as a mode of protest. Anna, a religious freethinker and an endearing feminist, with her unobtrusive routine, astounding energy and a fearless, fair mind has a positive influence on the aloof scientist. Her leaning towards the cause of freedom comes naturally to
her and there is something mystical about her attachment to Himapur, the primal world one left behind in childhood, the lost realm of infinite detail one repossessed only in dreams (210). Once questioned by the local freedom fighter, Madhav Rao, about her support to the methodology of boycott she had replied, it puts pressure (51). Anna considered inter-racial marriages as happy lived out way of denting into racial parochialism and cemented her ties with India through her mixed progeny. Her grand-daughter sums up her contribution to positive change:

She says she invented me. She was so disappointed the world hadn’t changed enough in her lifetime, she had to hurry it along. My father was not the sort to branch out and marry a dynamo on the other side of the world all on his own. (211)

With colonization firmly entrenched in the sub-continent, Indian history became a sort of subsidiary branch of the European history. The 20th century saw European countries colonize each other as the great Martiniquian writer, Aime Cesaire first pointed out that fascism was a form of colonialism brought home to Europe. Sahgal has captured the reverberations of the significant global events through the subsequent unfolding of the Indian political spectacle in most of her works to emphasize the inter-connectivity of the national histories. In Plans for Departure, the setting remains Indian, while the time frame revolves around World War I. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914 is the heightened background of the novel against which the bomb-blasters like Khudiram are projected. After the burial of Lulu, on August 4, that year, Henry Brewster announces the Austrian attack on Serbia and before the whole of Europe is drawn into war, the cast of Himapur is thrown helter-skelter in different parts of the globe. Anna does a night shift in an ammunition factory while Brewster dies fighting in the War, and India is drawn into the troubles of the West just by virtue of being a part of the Empire. In a letter to Anna, Nicholas
rues the trickle-down effect of political showdowns, Private matters will soon be at the mercy of bigger outer events, for that, ultimately is the tragedy of war (154). Nicholas survives the war to marry Anna and the novel ends on a high note of politico-personal combination of optimism as Gayatri nostalgically remembers, Anna and Nicholas in a newspaper picture the day [Nicholas] won his election to the Parliament, another later when she won hers and they became the only couple to sit on opposite sides of the House, living their triumphant parallel lives (213).

The grand tradition of historical recall has been infused with philosophical insights and the First, Second and Third World histories entwine to plead the case of the future civilization. Anna Hansen does a la Hieuen Tsang in the 20th century, albeit a shorter version of it, and this, according to Sahgal, is how countries should be invaded.

II

*Mistaken Identity*

Mother was no historian, but all time is story time on the Ganges plain.

*(Mistaken Identity 26)*

It is difficult to imagine, let alone celebrate, a blend of political and social realism, with the rudiments of existentialism, surrealism and the theatre of the absurd in a single literary piece. This is exactly what Sahgal has accomplished in her exceptional work *Mistaken Identity*. Eight out of her nine novels, firmly anchored to the bedrock of modern history, are meticulously realistic in setting and technique. Published in 1988, *Mistaken Identity* is a well-thought out exception. In this work Sahgal has transmuted form with aplomb, amalgamating the imaginative and real to create a rare literary artifact in post-colonial fiction. True to the historical reality, social stagnation, religious polarity and political backlash in the early thirties, the pendulum in the story swings between the real and the surreal with a perfect synthesis of the two. *Mistaken Identity* is unique not only for its...
innovative style but also for the transcendence of the autobiographical self by the author - it is the least self-corresponding of her fictional works. It is interesting to explore how abstract notions are made relevant to the writing of historical fiction, with the writer never losing touch with the exigencies of the freedom struggle throughout the plot. The more comical and absurd the situation becomes, the more effective is the rendering of gentle pathos and gravity of social and political injustice of the period. Sahgal engages with these social and political causes, and through the stylistic innovation endeavours to redeem the absurdity of existence, as influential existentialist authors Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus had done with their seminal texts *Nausea* and *The Outsider* respectively.

Although Sahgal has changed her methodology from unadulterated realism to a winsome mix of absurdist bizarreness and pragmatism, yet the core issues in the novel are, as a matter of commitment, taken from the social and political history of 20th century India. The story is woven around events that occurred towards the twilight period of colonialism - the salt satyagraha, the khilafat movement, the bombing of the legislative assembly, the round table talks, the hanging of Bhagat Singh and his companions, the postcolonial Marxist movement, mass arrests, the British control over ascendency laws of the rajas and maharajas, and the concluding desperate arbitrariness of the colonial power. For Sahgal history is a product of the collective actions of the human race in its entirety and a regional history derives its significance only when placed within the larger context of world history. The global political news, related to the rise of Mussolini and Fascism, Marx and Communism, Kemal Pasha Ataturk and the civil war in Turkey that filtered into India, are the basis of some vital imaginative strands of the story. A large part of the novel flows out from the ramparts of the jail; as a matter of fact, jail remains a perfect sanctuary for the dispersal, germination and growth of revolutionary ideas. The lessons from history remain solemn for Sahgal but the ironic and amusing treatment of the historical subject matter in *Mistaken Identity* in totality is
stark and effective. This artistic exercise in absurd candour and funny objectivity brings freshness to the writer’s fictional corpus, presenting yet another aspect of her multi-dimensional literary skills.

Bhushan Singh is the narrator-cum-protagonist of this mystery-romance and the reader follows the travails of his strange destiny to delve into the comically simplified complexities of the personal and political lives of the rest of the characters. He is disarmingly truthful, ethereally romantic, disrespectfully impartial, sparklingly intelligent and temperamentally voyeuristic - the reader impulsively trusts him. A linear description of the story in terms of the physical activities of Bhushan could be deceptive and overtly simplistic - he sails back from the US to land in Mumbai, spends a few days with a friend to abruptly leave for Vijaygarh, whereof he is the scion, only to be intercepted by an Anglo-Indian Police officer in the train, lands in jail on charges of sedition and after spending a good three years in prison, returns home to marry a jail inmates daughter, putting an end to his vagabondism. The enamoring feature of the layout is the Scheherazadian persona that Bhushan carves out for himself, to cope up with the sudden change of his destination and his strange predicament. His jail inmates, ideologically at loggerheads, who barely tolerate each other, gradually warm up to his innocuous wit and huddle together to listen to the story of his past. It is a sad eventful past but the bizarre narrative style lends it a ticklish poignancy that carries a hidden optimism in its funny insouciance.

The riddled life of Bhushan encapsulates the political, social and ideological predicament of his time. Born to one of the identical twin ranis of the Raja of Vijaygarh, with one of them cluelessly passing away later, identity remains an issue right from the beginning, whether it is his own or his mother’s. Around the celebrations of the third wedlock of his father, he falls in love with a Muslim girl, Razia. Their romantic escapades lead to communal riots in the principality; Bhushan is packed off to the US to get rid of his infatuation, but he is
stubbornly hinged to his home town and his heart to Razia - he returns to India rejecting a fantastic offer in movies and a fun-filled romantic affair. His father makes arrangements for his long stay in Bombay and he catches up with his Parsi love-flame, Sylla. He leaves Bombay abruptly, without informing Sylla, as he is completely shattered after having accidentally bumped into Razia in the hotel, who, far from being victimized by the punitive measures of Islam, is now comfortably settled as the wife of a high-up Turkish official. For more than a decade, his love for her had haunted him and he had even murdered an imbecile in a protective instinct towards her. Unwittingly in prison on charges of treason for an indefinite period, he nurses his bruised soul and makes up his mind to marry Sylla on being released. Ironically Sylla now wants to marry the Parsi lawyer, Nauser, recommended by her to defend Bhushan in his court trial. His complicated life does find a hopeful resolution in the end.

Sahgal is at her absurdist best in etching out the character of "Mother". The child in Bhushan remains alive and kicking throughout and is the closest to his mother. His sensitive nature has soaked in the agonies of her life, and there have been quite a few. The recourse to black humour to record the bitter pain of her life in marriage and purdah evokes deep-seated shock and remorse for the child and woman in her. Married early as an anonymous twin child to the Raja, her life has been an imperative struggle of bargaining with the Gods at the pantheon, on hills and plains, in north and south, for the blessings of an heir to the Raja. After eighteen years she finally delivered an heir, but the number of wives of the Raja continued to increase on some pretext or the other. The narrator hints at a possible physical union of his mother with a holy man on an elevated temple, a la the Russian Queen and Rasputin, a conjecture substantiated by the fact that none of the successive wives bore an issue for the Raja. Her struggle, frustrations, limitations and courage are objectively ridiculed by her narrator-son and these amusing weird details endear her to the reader revealing the depth of
Bhushan's regard and concern for his mother and by implication the feminine gender. Her life is a mirror reflecting the moral fabric of the society of the small kingdoms, awaiting their turn to be awakened by the changes taking place in the revolution infused India of the early 20th century. The engrossing story springs surprises all along but the biggest is spared for the last when Mother leaves home to marry her son's father-in-law, Yusuf. Bhushan, thus, ends his account:

And this is where Mother’s story begins. Early one morning she left the family mansion. I saw her hesitate for a second at the entrance and hold her breath before she walked out to star in the most sensational scandal of her generation. Society has not forgiven this liaison between an illiterate ranee and her communist lover. (193)

Bhushan Singh narrates fifteen out of the eighteen chapters of the novel from within the precincts of jail in first person. He is placed in a barrack, coated with mud and cow dung plaster, sharing it with nine others charged for conspiracy against the King, making him wonder if they had arrested him to "make a nice round number". The contemporary subaltern history finds inclusion in the portrayal of these remarkable unsung heroes of the Indian freedom movement. The oldest in the group is Bhaiji, a staunch Gandhian from the Indian National Congress who spins the wheel, fasts and preaches vegetarianism and abstinence. He is accompanied by two non-descript Congress workers called the "twins" for their mental rather than physical similarity, who got themselves arrested because they wouldn't have known when to sneeze without him (18). The ideologically driven communist foursome included comrades Pillai, Yusuf, Dey and Iyer. Their provocative anti-Gandhi banter kept the atmosphere electrified in the barrack and their interesting queries and inputs egg on the narrator to do justice to his role of Scheherazade. The next in the group was a government agent spying on the foursome who had to be spirited away to carry on his incognito activities
elsewhere because he had not known when to stop pretending he was a conspirator. The last was Sen, a boy too young to be anything in particular.

The jail is a symbolic as well as real setting of the story; it is a temporal as well as spatial fixture, a prolonged impermanence yet an unshakable reality, a paradox which connotes the honour as well as the infamy of its inmates. The variety of its occupants, the mindless brutalities of the authorities, the mass inflow towards its confinement and fast-untodeath undertaken for improvement of jail conditions makes it a microcosm of the Indian freedom struggle. The nine conspirators do hire advocates to rebut the false charges framed against them, to fight the injustice and arbitrariness of the colonial rule but certainly at another level, Bhaiji voices the sentiment of his generation when he declares, ‘Every Indian must get used to going to jail. Let it become our national profession.’ The pragmatic comrades of course did not lose the opportunity of ridiculing him. They grumble against being dumped in a muffasil jail when they deserved to be in a high profile jail like Lahore or Cawnpore with all the media attention — the gentle irony in this craving for spotlight is lost neither on the narrator nor on the reader. Bhushan, in spite of bagging opinion awards for being completely ‘ambitionless’ in the course of his globetrotting, freelance life-style, has epiphanous moments once trapped inside the prison:

There is no ceiling, only a V-shaped tile roof with a gap below it where the wall ends, to let in bats, blasts of weather and the phases of the moon. None of it adds or subtracts from this uncanny sensation of an eternal present made of insect bites, insomnia and the state of our bowels. This afternoon in court it dawned on me we were not spending an interminable, preposterous interlude cut off from real life. This is our real life. (95)

The colonial history created, contained and sent forth from the jails is the compelling leitmotif of the novel; accordingly most of the imaginative absurd drama is enacted in the
inconspicuous prison and the make-shift court room. The epochal events of Bhagat Singh's imprisonment, his initiating the fast-onto-death against the discrimination meted out to Indians in jails, his unwarranted death-by-hanging along with that of his companions, find echoes in the ramshackle *muffasil* prison inhabited by the unsung patriots, depicting how these landmark happening electrified the political atmosphere of the nation. The prison actually becomes the center-stage for the enactment and convergence of all motivating ideas circulating in the awakened minds of the times. It also becomes the theatre of violence and bloodshed - the callous attitude of the jailer, tripod lashing of young boys, indiscriminate firing on the Salt Satyagrahis, the clueless disappearance of young Sen, are samples of what went on inside the patriotic temples of honour. The incident on the night the Salt Satyagrahis flooded the jail reveals the harshness of treatment reserved for those who dared to hope for justice and freedom:

Behind [the jailor] in the shadowed yard an active horse-whip swings in an arc and descends on a boy, unchained from his companions and roped to a tripod. The boy is still screaming when the whip rises again—there is no beginning or end to the screams, they are joined together behind the jailer's sleep-coated smile— I see Bhaiji lean close to the boy's face— The next whiplash welds their two bodies sickeningly together. Bhaiji is plastered over the boy like protective armour— Someone shouts an order followed by rifle fire and bedlam— The whipped boy and one of his chained friends are dead of stray bullets. (100)

The other casualties of the whiplash incident are Bhaiji, who gradually succumbs to his injuries and Sen, whose unexplained disappearance is supposed to be an unuttered forewarning against raising the voice of rebellion for the rest of the survivors.
Far from being a correctional center, the jail institutionalizes corruption; it is a walled finality where everything, from prostitutes to drugs, is available on payment. Ironically the jail cannot, for sure, rectify the yearning for freedom looming large in the Indian consciousness. As a symbol, the jail holds together a gamut of paradoxes - a colonial hell, a patriotic heaven, a microcosm of the social strata of the freedom struggle, a den of corruption, the certainty of nothingness and the uncertainty of future. Its confines, conditions and nature of court verdicts symbolize the social, political and philosophical restraints and absurdities in the larger experience of life. At an objective level the jail is a glimpse of a space chock-o-block with inmates, a few of them convicts but mostly under-trials. It is a sight that brings home the high-handedness of the police and jail authorities and the grinding tardiness of the judicial system. The harmless high profile prisoner, Bhushan, along with his obscure companions virtually lives out the truth contained in the inscription on the gates of hell in Dante’s *Inferno* - ‘Abandon hope, all ye who enter here’ although the bizarre comical twist given to the tale, tickles rather than traumatizes the reader at the pathetic plight of the prisoners.

With a wittily crafted inlay of conflict within conflict in its ironic structure, the novel raises a veritable pyramid of small and large questions confronting India in the 1930s. At a political level a well nuanced clash between the Gandhian philosophy and the Marxist ideology has been incorporated into the sub-plot. The communist foursome in the jail, Dey, Yusuf, Iyer and Pillai, drawing upon their ready store house of statistics, are constantly engaged in mocking discussions about Gandhi with his disciplined follower, Bhaiji. The prison quarters become a theatre for presenting Marx and Gandhi sans adulation and hype, contrarily teasing out the absurdities in their mesmerizing programmes. This mild mockery may well be disconcerting and discomfiting to the followers of these iconic leaders but it is a fresh, merry treatment of an often wryly theorized subject.
Due to sharp difference of opinion, the comrades and Bhaiji are inevitably engaged in bickering with each other and the narrator observes: *They are off like snorting steam engines at the slightest provocation and it doesn’t take much to provoke them. Bhaiji is a diminutive engine but quite a snorter. One of the subjects they snort about is Gandhi.* The jail becomes an ideologically stimulating place and two contradictory ways of life co-exist under the same roof, colliding with each other at every self-righteous pronouncement. There isn’t an inch of common ground between the opposing parties; a striking difference emerges on the approach adopted by Gandhi towards the independence movement:

The comrades make him sound like a comma in the middle of a sentence which would read a hell of a lot faster without it. If he hadn’t called off the last civil disobedience agitation just because it turned violent, his party would be in better shape today. But with the stab in the back he gave it, it is thoroughly demoralized. And what else could you expect of a Machiavellian Utopian? (69)

The text underscores the fact that Gandhi did not endorse the aggressive methods of the Marxists by substantiating it with the incident of the hanging of Bhagat Singh and his companions, Rajguru and Sukhdev. Chapter fifteen suggestively opens with the words: *The Lahore Conspiracy Case is closed - with three hangings* Gandhi is out of jail but he couldn’t get the execution stayed (157). Although a lot of questions and controversies have been in the air regarding Gandhi’s silence or his low key posture towards this raging unjust punishment, the answers probably lie in the ideological differences between Gandhian and the Marxist thought. Bhagat Singh, a young Marxist enthusiast, repulsed by the political injustice and blatant economic exploitation taking place in the civilizing garb, had thrown a bomb in the Legislative Assembly, albeit hurting none, but Gandhi in all likelihood did not want his non-violent campaign smeared with the residue of gunpowder. That both, Gandhi
and Bhagat Singh, co-exist in the political folklore of the nation, is a tribute to the open assimilative nature of Indian thought.

If the comrades and the nationalists share the hope of seeing a free India while languishing in the decrepit jail, they are quick to differ on the vision of this new India. Sahgal has wittily juxtaposed the two divergent views and it is interesting to read them together:

The India of Bhaiji’s dreams is a country of vegetarian capitalists and rural handicrafts. A few machines such as sewing machines, that won’t corrupt the economy or the moral fiber, will be welcome. They will make way for leisure but not too much of it. Silk, wool and cotton will be spun in cottages. Citizens will abstain from sex and turn the other cheek. Independence will be the dawn of an era washed clean of drink and lust. (69)

The comrades’ India is going to be forged out of steel, concrete and electricity, glorified by nuts and bolts. Men will make love to throbbing machine parts. Machines will shiver, groan and respond. The sun will be made of molten metal, the stars of iron and steel. The machine-tool grease and the factory smoke will perfume the air. It seems entirely possible that men and women will turn into machines. (70)

The sharply contrasting visualizations are a manifestation of the hotly debated Marx versus Gandhi issue of that era, tangentially suggestive of the capitalistic/ethical moorings of the Gandhian philosophy. This tension was a precursor to the Cold War that prevailed between Russia and the United States of America in the aftermath of World War II. The communists identified Gandhi as a pillar of strength of the capitalist forces and there are hints of this perception in the ringing open declarations of the document of defense prepared by the haranguing comrades in the prison. Bhushan enumerates a few which made his afternoon nap impossible: the fuss about violence, considering the grotesque violence of imperialism.
across the centuries. Nothing will be allowed to sabotage the economic struggle of the workers and most significantly Pillai’s sharp condemnation of Gandhi’s trade unionism, Workers don’t need advice from Gandhi and his mill-owning capitalist friends (34-35). The reader finds a layering of this ideological incompatibility and intolerance at various levels of the plot and the Western world was beginning to reverberate with revolutionary forces of the communist thought. The film maker, Mr Goldberger, who is Bhushan’s host in America, rues the dangers of protesting longshoremen, carpenters, stockyard workers, telephone operators and is paranoid about the strike-work-culture shooting up the country as is obvious from his outburst:

Here’s this Red menace and President Wilson is off in Europe telling the Europeans how to make peace let them make any mess they want, but what we are doing in these United States with the a president who is off making peace in Europe when his own front yard is on fire, I don’t know. The Bolsheviks are coming, does he care? They could be infiltrating the movies. They’ve crashed into the Russian Famine Relief Fund. This country could go socialist in the middle of Wilson’s next speech (112).

When reminded gently of the report about the Attorney General’s office having unearthed a gigantic conspiracy against the country, he cools down to admit that the Fighting Quaker was on the job and his men were tracking down Bolsheviks with a fine tooth comb. Sahgal has converged with subtlety the diverse aspects of the issue as it bore upon world history and it would not be wrong to infer after analyzing the global perspective outlined in the novel that Gandhi’s silence on the death penalty to Bhagat Singh and his two companions for a trivial crime of throwing smoke bombs in the Central Assembly was a deliberated political move to gather support for the cause of freedom from the international community and to prevent the alienation of the Western capitalistic powers. The nationalists
and the communists were not strong enough to bargain for total political freedom at that point of time. On an ironical note, Sahgal has created fictional shadows of Bhagat Singh and his two comrades suffering in the Lahore prison, in the form of the Gandhian, Bhaiji and his dummy twins, languishing in the "muffasil" jail - either way, the unjust scepter of power prevails; Bhagat Singh dies of an act of violence, Bhaiji succumbs to the after effects of non-violence. This paradoxical coincidence of the fictional Gandhian and the non-fictional, non-Gandhian compatriots ending in the same political nihilism suggests that although Indian independence was primarily a sum total of disparate, ingenious political thought and action that took place within India, it was also an inevitable episode in the history of imperialism unfolding the world over.

One of the beautiful fictional moments in the novel is the one dealing with the most macabre incidents in the jail at the time of the Salt Satyagraha. The strength lies in the coming together of the ideological warring groups in the face of injustice. As soon as the prison is flooded with supporters of the civil disobedience movement, the jail officials let loose a reign of terror, to eliminate some and terrorize the others. With all bickerings and misgivings left behind, Yusuf, Iyer, Pillai, Dey, Sen, Bhaiji, the twins and Bhushan swing into action at the helplessness of the wretched prisoners - they join in the slogan raising (with an innocuous friction between "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai" and "Inquilab Zindabad" persisting as a token) and jump walls to stop the inhuman flogging nightmare of the boys tied to the tripod. Sen, the "communists' mascot", and Bhaiji, the disciplined Gandhian, are the martyrs of this random incident proving that the religion of all revolutionaries is humanity. Towards the end of the story the socialists formally join hands with the nationalists to achieve freedom, signaling a victory of the pluralistic approach. Each brand of nationalism, with its inspirational content as well as its idiosyncrasies, be it the fairy tale idealism of communism
or the social pragmatism of Gandhian thought, paved the way to expedite the journey towards freedom.

A fresh reckoning of history has been one of the mainstays of Sahgal’s fiction throughout; in *Mistaken Identity* this recall grounds the fictional moments with a masterly ease. Primarily a toast raised to the success of Kemal Pasha Ataturk of Turkey, who stood like a rock in the way of the colonial onslaught in the Middle East, the book includes significant snippets from Italian history on Mussolini, an unconventional take on the Czarina-Rasputin relationship, the simple ethics of the Zoroastrian tribe in India, the unwieldy baggage of Hindu-Muslim unison and a sparkling treatise on the razzmatazz of American renaissance – all intricately woven into the plot. While each of these references will be analyzed a little later, to begin with, the focus is on the literary reflections of Kemal Pasha and the Turkish struggle for political and religio-cultural transformation. This piece of the study assumes contemporary relevance in the volatile scenario of the “Arab Spring 2011” that has shaken the monarchical and dictatorial orthodoxies in the Muslim nations of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco et al. The Islamic countries in the Middle East, steeped in challenge and change, are now headed in the direction of moderate political Islam and are adopting positions to bring about economic prosperity and constitutional law. Bobby Ghosh, in the Summer Journey issue of the *Time* titled “Travels through Islam” finds the Islamic movements genuinely reinventing themselves, not merely as a media posture, but to match the expectations of the young revolutionaries of this upsurge: “Paranoid rhetoric about threats to Muslim identity have given way to political messaging that could have been lifted from the party platforms of any Western democracy” The Islamists may have recognized that their radical tune is played out this is no time to debate the finer points of Koranic jurisprudence (40-43). With remarkable insight, sensitivity and intelligence Sahgal has brought center stage the man who, in the Middle East, was way ahead of his times - who
realized about a century ago the crippling consequences of hard-line Islam. Post-Ataturk, the army became the virtual custodian of secular Turkey, but in the wake of the Arab Spring it is being judiciously sidelined by the civilian government headed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and another change is waiting to take place in the Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul.

The Turks in the 1920s, under the leadership of their dynamic leader, Kemal Pasha, regained their legendary military glory with a cultural revolution in tow. Bhushan enlists the historical marvels of the Turks in conversation with his "cosmopolite, handsome, light-skinned hotel neighbour, an enthusiastic government official involved in the reform in Turkey, who he discovers later, is the messiah of his damsel in distress:

An eleventh-century Turk had brought Islam to India. Five hundred years later a Turk great-grand-child of the dreaded Tamerlane - had founded the Mogul dynasty. A Turk had thrown back the Crusaders. A Turk had halted the Mongols. A Turk had finished off the Byzantine Empire. I had no trouble believing the Turks could remake themselves if they wanted to. Already they were remaking Islam. (8)

When the British imposed humiliating terms on Turkey after World War I, there was resentment among the Muslims the world over, including India, as the Sultan of Turkey was also regarded as the Caliph of Islam. The khilafat movement was started in India in 1919 by the Ali brothers to protect the Caliphate. Gandhi and Tilak seeing an opportunity of strengthening Hindu-Muslim unity appealed to all Indians to observe 17 Oct. 1919 as the Khilafat day. Sahgal does not approve of this support to the Caliph and boldly raises the curtain on the lives of two Caliphs. In the novel the Turkish official recounts how Vahid-ed-Din VI, the last Sultan-Caliph of the House of Osman escaped to Malta with only seven retainers and two eunuchs carrying jewels, gold coffee cups and a gold table. His five wives and children had had to be left behind in a rush. Vahid-ed-Din’s cousin had succeeded him
only as Caliph but not for long. He was packed off a couple of years later too fast to take his seraglio along. And that was the end of the whole caboodle(8). In the revolution that took place under Kemal Pasha, the Caliphate was dissolved in 1924, the religious orders were abolished in 1925 and the Sharia was replaced by the western civil code in 1926. But Bhushan’s guest is quick to remind him: We are not pagan. We have freed Islam, not renounced it. We say, if English Christianity can be Anglican, why can Islam be Turkish?(9) This incredible change was brought about by Pasha, a military inspector-general turned generalissimo who routed out the allied forces of Britain, France, Italy and Greece from Turkey, besides dealing with the opposition from the Caliph who had declared jihad against him. The charisma of the leader spills from the lyrical outburst of his officer in conversation with Bhushan:

He is everything to us, a military savior! a teacher! a dance instructor! You should see him at parties. He makes everybody dance, the ministers, the deputies, everyone. It is the duty of the Turks to be good dancers, he says. Believe me we have the latest western music, Negro jazz, foxtrots, in addition to Viennese waltzes. Why do you go to London and Paris my friend? Come to Turkey. (80)

In a country where women wore veils and were never seen in the streets, this cultural revolution was nothing short of a miracle. Mustafa Kemal modernized the fierce national dance Zabek; banned the rigmarole called fez cap; threw out the cumbersome Sheikh’s robes and baggy trousers; introduced boots, shoes, trousers, shirt, tie, jacket, waistcoat, the headgear of the hat and used the foxtrot as a sex equalizer(40).

The hype created about the issue of Hindu-Muslim harmony during the Khilafat movement overshadowed the meaningful changes taking place in Turkey, a nation that stands apart as a model of reform and beacon of hope for the forward-looking Muslim communities
all over the world. As depicted in the novel, even among the Parsees, let alone the Hindus and the Muslims, there is intense fervour for the cause of the Caliph and nostalgia about Constantinople. Sylla’s grandmother is totally sold on the venture and Bhushan laments the total misconception in the minds of the elite literate class: “What incensed Grandmother was the British government’s treatment of the imperial Ottoman dynasty, older by far than the Hohenzollerns and the Romanovs, and as old as the Habsburgs, and it made no difference that none of these was exactly reigning” (116). Bhushan calls the business of the Caliph being a “Shadow of God” as rot, to which Sylla vociferously objects but standing up for his martial hero he explains, “It’s not the only one. It was rot to the Moguls. They were so rich and powerful they didn’t have to kowtow to the Ottoman Caliph. Akbar refused to. He said he was the Shadow of God on earth himself. He had The great Sultan, the exalted Khalifa inscribed on his gold coins to prove it, and he named his capital dar al-khilafat (116). As Bhushan and Sylla were advocating for two different Turkeys, an imperial Turkey and a modernized Turkey, it took Sylla a while to understand the change these reforms would usher in the medieval mindset. Bhushan celebrates the victory of Pasha in the final battle of Afium Quarahisar as the “birthday of his heart” and jubilantly admits: “Subconsciously I must have been waiting for him all my life, this prelude to all pandits and ulemas being pulled up by their combined roots and sent packing” (117).

Sahgal is convinced that Mustafa Kemal is the harbinger of progressive change and highlights his achievements by supporting them with concrete facts to immortalize him for the legend that he is. A great artistic effort has been made to rectify the misunderstood historical truths and draw attention to the exemplary leader whose image lies concealed by the clouds of Islamic fundamentalism and colonial representations of history. The historical personage is not superimposed on the plot but is rather a dynamic force that intensifies the sad irony of the youth of the protagonist. Bhushan, callously separated from the love of his
life, Razia, aimlessly drifts in the world, imagining her to be in some loathsome circumstances, languishing in his love. His meeting Razia as the pampered brimming wife of a competent Turkish official, a protégé of his iconic hero, Kemal Pasha, is the ironic high point of the story if it couldn’t have got better for Razia.

The absurdity of being thrown in prison, soon after, in a state of emotional coma, when he is on his way to Vijaygarh for his own burial is a variation of the ongoing circus in his life. The effortless, unobtrusive role of Scheherazade that he dons is relieving, purgatory and simply classic. A gentle optimistic tone pervades through the bizarre nightmarish incidents of the novel and the joie de vivre is kept alive there are celebrations galore in the rays of hope gleaming from the pages of history. Mistaken Identity is certainly a toast raised to Turkey, the new Mecca and Sahgal includes a quote directly from Pasha’s speeches in Bhushan’s exuberant Juhu beach party, to give a first-hand idea of the man that he was:

Civilization pierces the hills! Soars in the skies, sees and illuminates and studies all things from the invisible atom to the stars Civilization is a blazing fire that burns and obliterates those who will not acknowledge her(133).

Amongst religions of the world, it is Islam which commands its followers to, as Al Biruni says in Kitab-ul-Hind, wage war until all men cry āā ilaha illa ‘llah and Sahgal concludes And all men never would (61). Within the domain of political philosophies, this line of thought, of being the exclusive club, has been the copyright of the communists who are forever divining and devising solutions based on fantastic theses(155), posturing to be intolerant of all lesser idealism in their hypothetical optimism. They hit hard at religion, tradition, family life, and all other forms of protest including that of the Khaddar workers imperialism, colonialism, oligarchy, monarchy, democracy and what not - nothing short of a commune is desirable. But a special tirade is reserved by them for the up-scale evils like tyranny, slavery etc. as is clear from this condescending diatribe by the comrades of
Mussolini: Fascism is a straw in a breeze, here today, gone tomorrow. Who is this Italian anyway but an ex-journalist at a loose end? No ideology, no programme except for the bullets and massive doses of castor oil for his opponents. He so hard up for his ideas he had to fall back on the old imperial Roman salute and symbol. He lasted as long as he has castor oil (43). It was a bit early in the day for the other inmates to remind them that socialism was established only with authoritarianism in China, Russia and the other smaller nations and a stateless/classless society is a pipedream. All contemporary issues of the 1920s are reported, dissected and treated pathologically by the comrades, but this curse on fascism may have been a rare occasion of consensus in the prison cell.

To depict the weird and wonderful bonding between Bhushan and Mother, the writer has aptly chosen her controversial contemporary, the grand-daughter of Queen Victoria of England and the Empress consort of Russia, Tsarina Feodorovna as a historical parallel. The Tsarina, whose only son Tsarevich Alexei Nikolaevich was suffering from Haemophilia B, an incurable disease those days, nearly died of injury in 1912 when he was only ten years of age. He was saved by the prayerful intervention of a crude Siberian mystic, Grigori Rasputin, now a semi-biographical subject of pop music and famous Hollywood movies. The Tsarina, in gratitude, vowed to stand by Rasputin, who was falsely rumoured to have been her paramour. The fact of the matter is that the Tsarina, an exceptionally dedicated mother to her children, had tried medicine, orthodox ritual and prayers, and was utterly helpless when the notorious demiurge saved the young prince. Mother in the Mistaken Identity was completely shattered when the Romanov family, with whom she identified during her passionate struggle to procure a male heir for the principality of Vijaygarh, was executed in 1917 and it was a wrecking coincidence that in the same year, with their son seventeen years of age, her husband married for the third time. Narrating the heart-rending story of his mother, who knew marriage for the chamber of horrors it is, Bhushan Singh puts this pain plainly,
She's never been the same since. She has another ambition. She wants to turn to stone (32).

She admired the Tsarina's simplicity, understood her helplessness as a mother and defended the need of the mystic to be by the side of the boy:

And what wonders the sadhu Rasputin had performed for her son. Why shouldn't she receive Rasputin in her room? What did his low birth matter? The famous tantrics were all low-born leather workers, woodcutters, stable cleaners. Meat, drink and carousing were all in the tradition. Who could doubt that the huge strapping peasant with the hypnotic eyes had the authentic healing power? Any mother would have been out of her mind with anxiety for her only beloved son. (31)

Considering the time his parents spent bribing and bargaining with every major deity in the pantheon for a son, Bhushan is convinced that he has spent not nine months but nine years in his mother's womb. Mother conceived miraculously but not before covering every sacred inch in pilgrimages in India, and her son recollects from the stories he was told: She was more like a warrior queen falling on her sword in defiance of defeat and disgrace... I imagined her journeying more or less horizontal across limitless legendary expanses, garlanding every deity, anointing every scared rock with vermilion from the snowline down to the tropical jungle, from sea to sea (23). Holding ill Bhaiji in his arms, one night in the jail, the extremely difficult pilgrimage to a high up cave that mother did barefoot and alone, as told and retold to him by the maid, Bittan, floods Bhushan's mind and he realizes the fathomless mystery of his genuinely mistaken identity... Perhaps that is how it happened, my tireless pilgrim, my mother, or whoever you are, and Father's stray droplets had nothing to do with it (156). Not surprisingly the Rasputin induced trance that Mother sometimes comforted in, had to be broken into with some concrete incident, says Bhushan, of the time when I was minus one year old, but so strenuously prayed for, I was as good as expected.
Sahgal has interwoven, in soul and spirit, the narrator’s compulsive condition of birth with the historical Russian legend of Rasputin, considered by some as living divinity who gave "private blessings" to women in his bedroom. There are symbolic implications galore but since they do not fall in the ambit of this project, it suffices to say that the history of the circumstances of motherhood is eternally and universally similar.

For Sahgal the past of an object, practice, an individual, nation and so on is essential for clear understanding, for getting the right perspective and for carrying forward the enlightening achievements of the human civilization. Bhushan’s friend, Sylla, is a Parsee and on the sidelines of the story, much gets revealed about this unique community as he muses:

It is true I wasn’t having this lyrically passionate affair with Zoroaster but in a way I wasé Sylla was my peace, my haven from the furies of Hinduism and Islam, because she was a Parseeé Her drop-in-the-ocean sect believed in a God of Light and God, who pre-dated Islam in Persia, and they fled when the storm came. Peace be with you, all religions say. Only Sylla’s means it. These pale people who have devoted themselves to creating culinary masterpieces, making money, and dispensing charity, have done no one any harm. Of whom else on earth can this be said? The city of their religious origin seems to have vanished, its name lost. It could be Rhages ? Rhei ? Rei? Ray? No matter, they do without a Ganges or a Mecca. But you can’t tell a woman that you are her devoted servant because her prophet was a decent sort, and the origin of her ism is obscure. (122)

An adherent of her faith, modern, witty, brainy, tasteful, crisp and open-minded, Sylla epitomizes the avant-garde Parsee culture flourishing in the 1920s. She was into theatre and poetry - had dramatized Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* for stage shows for a lady Daruwala’s charity, set up a tableau based on a modern version of poetry composed by her on
the flute player, Lord Krishna. The next mission she took up was organizing meetings to raise funds for the Khilafat cause on the request made by the Muslim traders to her grandmother. Of course Bhushan, who was sold on the “matchless flair of the Ottoman soldier turned civilian president,” Kemal Pasha Ataturk differed with her on this issue. Extremely trendy in the sartorial statements that she made, it fascinated Bhushan to imagine her in the backwaters of Vijaygarh: I longed to toss her like a lacy hand grenade into the center of the bazaar and enjoy the consternation, or set her down among Mother’s geese [attendants] and watch them flap and squawk in amazement while bare expanses of Sylla’s skin turned faintly delectably green. Sylla’s effort to pull Bhushan out of the abysmal depth of his love-loss speaks volumes for the widely accepted common sense of her community - sampling a few utterances proves her patience with her lover: You are making a holy out of holies of your monomania; You can make a profession of being in love; You have built this up into a mountain, a girl you knew for a couple of months; You are obsessed with your obsession, not with her; Has it ever struck you, you’re self-sufficient, an absent woman suits you best? Jumbo? Jumbo! You couldn’t have come to a stop in 1918. Calling him a narcissist, scolding him for making a cult out of [his] nympholepsy Sylla continued to be friends with Jumbo but went on to marry Nauser, the Parsee lawyer, happy keeping her commitment to faith and community.

What Sylla could not perceive, beneath the wounds of youthful romance, was the tumour caused in his heart by communal riots between the Hindus and Muslims, apparently as a repercussion of the lascivious activities of the son of the Raja of Vijaygarh - it appears he was born with a scapegoat destiny. Twenty-seven people died in the first pogrom and children were mercilessly thrown into fire in the second. His father fretted, I have no explanation for the Commissioner… My face is black before the Ottoman government. While in jail in the final case of mistaken identity on charges which rocketed from
political to elemental and fundamental, from depriving the King Emperor of his sovereignty to uprooter of the social fabric (151) Bhushan ruminates over the unfortunate events to realize the unleashing of beastly colonial politics by the British to divide the Hindus and Muslims at the time of the Khilafat movement. Ironically, he was opposed to the Caliph and had nothing to do with the political unity. Being a poet, an agnostic and a liberal he lashes out at Nauzer, in desperation, after being illegally detained for more than three years, "People who've sat on the same soil together for close to a thousand years grow one fat arse in common and stay put on it. And they damned well learn to bugger along together if nobody meddles. Tell your government that" (173). He recalls his mother being skeptical of the resident commissioner who delayed his passport in the hope of starting another riot targeting him: "Her theory is that the British need a Hindu-Muslim riot now and then. No riot, no raj (92). His unsparing scathing remarks on Gandhi are the ramifications of his disappointment with the shallow approach of the magnetic political icon of the era to acculturation: "Gandhi makes no sense to me at all. Goes on bleating about a Hindu-Muslim love but a Hindu-Muslim marriage would send him on a fifty-day fast… The unifiers take care not to let us blood mingle. By unity they mean their trumped-up unities, public emotions gushed on like taps, then each to his liar until it time to tear each other to pieces again (36). Utterly frustrated with this treacherous politics he sees more in common with the Bolsheviks in matters of faith who are at least not humbugs like the believers and shares with the inmates: "I see no difference between bloody old Russia and bloody new Russia, except Mother Russia's new religion (48). He laments the exclusion of the most significant questions by his lawyer in the court and the following hypothetical conversation takes place in his mind:

What is your religion?

I am a Hindu Muslim. Or put it the other way round, lawyer.

Your mother tongue?"
Poetry. But if you are going to finick about it, my mother tongue is Hindi, and my father tongue is Urdu.

Then I say I love dreams in both languages. My diet, and therefore my digestion, is mostly Muslim, but my blood seems to circulate in Hindu fashion, and my heart beats alternately to each. (144)

Stating sexual unity as the acid test of the Hindu-Muslim unity, racial impurity and multiculturalism as the hope of future communal harmony, his warning is replenished with the idealism of a poet; if these men have their way, we’ll have a songless danceless universe. (119).

Razia was Bhushan’s unfinished story of Islam, Sylla was his Parsee mainstay in Bombay and Wilhelmina, nicknamed Willie-May, a Jew, was his window to the United States of America. In contrast to double-dip depression of the present times, America of the 1920s was a land of food and freedom, an inner landscape, not a country, a dream sequence where a man and woman lay naked in broad daylight drinking a cocktail with neither guilt nor innocence between them. (102); a country where resemblance mattered and the narrator could have earned fame and fortune in Hollywood for he was constantly mistaken for Ramon Novarro, Antonio Something or Something Cortez; a land where the Bolshevik take-over was nascent but the underworld threat was real - the mafia legends Johnny Torrio, Gyp of the Blood, Lefty Louie, Al Capone were calling the shots; where the Turkey-trot, Camel walk, Bunny hug, Grizzly bear, Yearning saunter were names of preliminary dance steps; and sex was an open, relaxing, healthy indulgence which did not result in a riot. The India of that decade was not easy for an American to comprehend, for America was pushing towards becoming a nation with freedom, equality, justice and opportunity at every door-step, while the situation in India was socially and politically grim and a far-cry from these magical ideals; Bhushan recollects: Willie-May was intrigued by
my twin mothers and Father flopping flaccidly between them (108). The American picture of liberal economy, individualistic attitude, exotica and adventure has bearings of Sahgal’s experience as a university student - deep insight informs the contrast brought out by the depiction of diverse societies in the same decades of history – India, Russia, Turkey, England and America.

The politicization of, what passes in the name of, religion, is the biggest lament of the author. In modern South Asian democracies, Nandy observes that “ideology and politics of secularism have more or less exhausted their possibilities” (Time Wraps 67), and he proposes a return to the antiquity of *sanatan* religious traditions outside the ideological grid of modernity wherein lies not only a tolerance of religions but also a tolerance that is religious (87). Sahgal too, is disillusioned with the pseudo-secular statecraft that has been on the rise in Indian polity. Not surprisingly, the no-religion state of the Bolsheviks augurs hope for Bhushan who is utterly disillusioned with the raking up of communal issues in the most savage manner for political motives. Bhushan goes to the heart of the matter in his conversation with Mr. Goldberger on the issue of wars fought in the name of religion: “Who hasn’t put who to the sword at one time or another? That’s what ghastly old history is all about. And at this point what does it matter who killed who in the year dot? In any case, no one ever killed for religion” (110).

III

*Lesser Breeds*

Deciphering the ré palimpsest of India’s History   (Lesser Breeds 167)

*Lesser Breeds* - *A Novel* is a scintillating kaleidoscopic glimpse into the lives of Indian, British and American characters engaged in living out through their thoughts and actions the specific historical agendas of their nations and their destinies. The fictional
weave is worked out within the solid framework of modern Indian history, World War II and other significant international events; the fine emotional embellishments are provided by the rapidly evolving social tapestry of the times. The novel mellifluously folds in impressions of colonialism, anti-colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and fascism, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of 1857 and 1919, Ahimsa, the Dandi March, the civil-disobedience wave, police excesses, jail, Zamindari and Partition, of the history of Italy, Germany and England, of the policies of Japan, China and Burma, the foreign policy of America and most interestingly the embryonic Indo-US relationship before and after independence. The novel, without doubt, not only qualifies to the genre of "historical metafiction" but also sets a classical example of it in Indian English literature. The vast canvas of this literary project has sprinklings of the dark and the light happenings of the first half of the 20th century and places India within the global political design in totality, rather than displaying overt patriotism towards its singular history of suffering and injustice.

The story unravels through the consciousness of a lecturer of English at the university of Akbarabad, Nurullah, who takes up the responsibility of helping the charismatic freedom fighter, Nikhil (better known as Bhai), with his heavy load of daily correspondence. He gradually becomes a trusted inmate in the home-cum-party headquarters of his master and is entrusted the tough job of undoing the colonial education, by now firmly ingrained in the mind of his juvenile daughter, Shan. Through Nurullah's straight-forward approach and his deeply reflective thoughts Sahgal unveils the curtain on the fictional town of Akbarabad, with its history of colonial violence and brutality, its cross-cultural exchange, its social interactions and political struggles. The story of Akbarabad, a microcosm of the large freedom crusade, runs parallel to the haunting macabre personal life experience of Nurullah - the former is about political hegemony while the latter is about social wilderness - while the first is a fallout of the Western imperialistic design, the second is a ghoulish social practice of Eastern
origin. The American strand of the story emerges through, Edgar Knox, an American
journalist, who is sympathetic to the Indian struggle for independence and can see through
the fabrications of the British foreign policy based on its compulsions of waging the second
World War. The post-colonial part of the story is interspersed with the visits of a young
American research scholar, Pete Ryder to Nurullah, symbolizing the growing engagement of
the contemporary generation with Indian thought - especially the miraculous use of the
weapon of Ahimsa.

Explaining to Shan, the history of conquerors on the rich soil of the Ganga belt, left
behind by the withdrawing sea waters antiquities ago, Nurullah epigrammatically locks up
the Indian sentiment towards the British colonizers: Everyone surrendered to the spell of
Hindustan. Except the Europeans (61). Sahgal has been consistent in her advocacy of the
richness of the layered Indian culture being an outcome of historical processes but sadly notes
that the colonial aspirations of the Europeans were largely fired by avarice and racism.
History is forcefully deconstructed in the blunt talks of Eknath, a friend and colleague of
Nurullah who teaches History. In one of their evening banters, Eknath, realistically sketches a
succinct masterly resume of the nation/individual that makes it into history:

For savagery as a way of life the Europeans took the prize. Witness their tribal
wars of succession, their ferocious religious persecution, their global plunder,
their cannibal appetite for flesh to subdue, their avarice for land and gold.
Observe their blood-thirst when they didn’t get their way, their arrogance
when they did. They couldn’t even take religion without making it an excuse
for a jihad and packing it off to holy war with their Pope’s Christian blessings.

Moral: if you want a place in History do as Europe does. (42)

Lesser Breeds is the saga of the strange triumph of non-violence in an age of such
intellectual skepticism and political impatience. Very subtly, Sahgal has brought history and
literature together with their diverse standpoints yet firm affiliations - at one level Eknath and Nurullah become metaphors for history and literature respectively, with Eknath interpreting the tides of power and Nurullah trying to tame the same. Their enduring friendship symbolizes the overlapping that will forever exist between the two disciplines. While Eknath proverbially seems to have learnt his lessons from history as proven from his cemented rebuttals in the evening tea sessions that they had at professor Robin-da’s place, Nurullah is coaxed by Robin da to add freshness (read postcoloniality) to his ideas, which he does in the process of helping Shan unlearn her convent education. Making him aware of the opportunity he had got of Ŕstudying the movement first hand Ŕhis mentor gives him a scathing discourse, ŔAsk yourself what country your brain lives in, Nurullah, and why from morning to night you are passing on meaningless mass of harks, yonders, skylarks and daffodils to your First Years. If you cannot produce something from the mysterious mechanism of your own mind, learn from those who can. Observe what is going on around you. Cultivate another way of thinking Ŕ(15). The freedom movement had set the process of decolonization rolling - the Indian consciousness had been stirred.

The scraping off of the veneer of charitable and civilizing missions from the cultural politics of the colonizers cleared the vision of the unjustly subjugated Ŕesser breeds Ŕand a re-reading and re-writing of history got initiated. Visualizing the vast vistas of the Americas Ŕwaiting tens of thousands of years in static epic silence for Europeans to come sailing and their history to begin Ŕ(118), Nurullah wonders about the representations of Indian culture and history in European narratives and is dreadfully alarmed when Shan brings her text books home. The tone set by the deconstructionist rollicking irreverence of Eknath towards the European treaties resonates through the text, adding withering wit to an inconsolable past: Ŕm hanging on to this half of Asia but you my Cousin- brother-king , can have the other half. And my royal in-law-king gets extra African highland to make up for losing all the
jungle he had before. “Property agents at heart, these Europeans!” (109) Finally when Nurullah explains the story of the āngrez to Shan, thus it goes:

First they came as traders to trade, then they got greedy and broke the trading rules, then they armed themselves to protect their ill-begotten profits, then they hired soldiers and built fortresses to defend the loot. Then they grabbed land and called it theirs. The story of the empire, dost. It goes from Company to Cantt to Crown. (81)

It is quite understandable that Shan takes the new hermeneutics with a pinch of salt - the impressions of narrative hegemony are not easy to erase. While Eknath, Nurullah, Robin-da and other participants of the tea party conferences, battle out the ideological aspects of colonialism, it is the cultural damage incurred that pre-occupies the thoughts of Pyare Chacha, an elderly relative of Bhai, staying in the mansion which is now a national monument, āevery patriotā Mecca since the family lead from the front. His theory was that besides draining out raw material and other resources to propel the industrial revolution in England, the British had ākilled off good tasteā In a monograph on the subject, he had lamented that unlike China, which was ābuggered on the fringesā India had been buggered āright through her navelā and that too in the āfrumpish ageā of Queen Victoria. Only the Indian cuisines had survived the relentless conquest and according to the aesthetic wisdom of Chacha, āfor decoration in all its refinement India must fall back on China, Cambodia, Siam and other less corrupted heritages until she could reclaim her ownā(125). Quite evidently and lamentably, the cultural quotient of imperialism has seeped deep into our linguistic, sartorial, artistic and decorative consciousness with a brutal superiority rather than assimilation and syncretism.

Typically, Sahgal has kept up her rational approach by focusing on the force that causes history to happen - on economics. And this is what makes Sahgal a unique literary
personality - her ability to hard talk through the gentleness of the folds of fiction. It was the hysteria of gold-lust that scattered Europeans all over the globe and the characters in the novel do not mince their words spelling out some harsh facts that ruined the agrarian economy, making the indigenous Zamindar seem benign compared to the Company. The course of her extended stay at the mansion in Akbarabad, Jeroo, wife of Mr. Ghasvala, and a friend of Bhai, referring to the British asks him, Òits history now. Why not let them stay?Ó and Bhai replies, Òbecause, my dear, we cannot afford themÓ. He exasperatedly goes on to remind her about the two hundred percent increase in land revenue in Bengal under Warren Hastings, when one third of its population was wiped out in famine and analyses the economic rape of the nation irrefutably:

The company’s enormous profit from land and from its trading monopoly went back to Britain to finance their spinning jenny and powerloom and steam engine and gave the Bank of England capital to invest in the British Isles. They called it India’s tribute. And when the crown took over from the Company most of this tribute was lent back to India and called the Public Debt. When Indian taxpayers ¿ who else? ¿ repaid it, it was used to finance British wars, in Afghanistan, in China, in Ethiopia. And where do you think the money comes from to pay the expenses of Britain’s Mediterranean fleet? And who funds their petroleum ventures in Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait? (102)

Medieval Indian history is largely a saga of the ravages of the Muslim conquistadors. Although the rulers, from Turk to Mughal had their extravagances, they not only made India their home and but also that of their progeny. The British changed the rules of the game. At a party hosted by the Parsi couple, the Ghasvalas, in Bombay, Nurullah surrounded by the foreign tycoons, reflects on the persistence of the European traders to garner wealth. In
weather conditions where the average life of a white man was put at two monsoons and there was a high possibility of landing in the closely packed cemeteries, it occurred to him that to make a fortune or not love, lust, jealousy or hate - was [the white] man’s most death defying passion (140). Acquisition of wealth became a mania for the Westerners and they were willing to risk adventure for it. The larger plan of the British reeks of conspiracy and self-interest with their attitude towards the niggards remaining largely racist. They landed like vultures on pelf, and from there leaped to power, and then to absolute power.

The major section of the novel titled Company Bagh resonates with the shameless brutality that thundered in the Jallianwala Bagh in 1919. The meta-narrative of the Jallianwala Bagh, often referred to in the story, contains innumerable unsung indignities committed on the Indian populace in small towns as symbolized by the Company bagh incidents in Akbarabad. In the aftermath of a non-violent public rally addressed by Bhai, with a welter of bodies painfully disentangling while others lay around like crumpled question marks. Nurullah overhears a volunteer say regretfully, They aren’t used to non-violence, ahimsa turns them into mad dogs. The sight arouses memories of a journalistic account of the well-aimed brutalities on the Salt Marchers of Dandi: Rods had descended on unprotected heads, leaving fractured skulls and broken shoulders on the sand. Then the police had borne down on the inert bloodied bundles and savage kicking had begun (19). Eyewitness accounts and photographs at the Jallianwala Bagh archive and at other history museums validate these accounts of the utterly callous punitive measures meted out to the Indians. The colonial situation had become so deplorable that only two modes of demeanor worked, either sycophancy or servility, and as Nurullah reflects, the moment the one dared to transgress the unbearable derogatory limits one lay dead in Company Bagh or alive in the stinking cantonment, or tied to a whipping tripod or suffering rods up the anus and if lucky, only a
spectator to the sport (109). Mahatma Gandhi having discerned the haplessness of the masses without invoked their power within - the spirited shield of ahimsa.

Pete Ryder, an American student, researching non-violence, the fuse of the soul force had been directed to Nurullah for his first-hand impressions of the movement. Ryder being a pacifist has optimistic romantic notions about Ahimsa and regards it as an underground Indian river, now hidden, now surfacing, but always present in our culture and our consciousness (113). While the narrative covers the crucial happenings of the 1930s and the 1940s, in India and abroad, it gives no impression of the British relenting to the force of Ahimsa. On the contrary there are repeated statements to the effect as the one made by Eknath after a martial onslaught in the town, For the authorities it is always 1919 and in Akbarabad it is still 1857 as far as they are concerned. Once a mutineer, always a mutineer to which Nurullah adds, The stuff of the Angrez brain fever. They have violence on their brain though they are dealing with ahimsa now (74-75). Having experienced those heady times for nearly two decades before independence, Sahgal, in retrospect, gives a very mellowed impression of a belief which enthused her own youth like Ryder’s, when Nurullah skeptically reminisces about the ahimsa movement which was based on an idea whose time would never come, maybe in all its full glory:

It was a time cut out of time, cut off from before and after. It was just that once. It was hard to believe even while it was happening. Every bystander asked himself, Can it be true? Am I seeing this happen? (113-114)

For Eknath, non-violence in the final analysis was about as much use as the Pope’s balls (363) but his friend had evolved his own literary perspective. Nurullah, born to a girl-child who was raped by a father and son, and witch hunted in a pregnant stage by being hung upside down over the blazes of fire and chilly smoke, avenges his mother’s death by killing the rapist. The bizarre violence of the condition of his birth makes him see non-
retaliation as a sign of weakness so much so that he reads Gandhi in Shelly’s poem *Mask of Anarchy*: "Look upon them as they slay/ till their rage has died away" and puts it away opting for a more inspiring poem on conventional combat to teach his students. He remained skeptical about Ahimsa but understood it as a way of marking time till something forceful was offered, after this curt reply of Bhai to his question if Ahimsa would change anything: "What else have unarmed people got?" (108).

One of the strange historic ironies of the 20th century has been the simultaneous flourishing of the greatest antinomies of the times— the philosophy of non-violence in the East and the Nazi ideology in the West. Even stranger is the historical fact that while the Indians were armed with ahimsa back home, they were loaded with armaments, after their forced conscription, to fight Britain’s war in Europe. Sahgal tackles the complex issue of World War II with élan, incorporating into the narrative the most diverse views on the issue. Nawab Zaheer Khan of Vazirabad, argued angrily at an emergency meeting called after the Viceroy drafted India into Europe’s war with Mussolini-style contempt for elected legislator and confronted Bhai on his offer of partnership with the British in war:

*When will we stop laying down our lives for their wars?* We captured Khartoum for them, defeated the rebellion of the Arabi Pasha in Egypt for them, dethroned King Thebaw and captured Burma for them. They used Indian troops to crush the Boxers who were Chinese patriots trying to stop the sale of opium. Indian soldiers were rushed to the front at Ypres and Flanders to relieve the British. Yet after the victory the King refused to give Indians command of the army because no British officer must serve under an Indian (150)

Nikhil Bhai, with his charismatic earnestness, helps the fellow leaders realize the implications of the Nazi menace to the human race and urges them to show consensus on an issue which deserved abhorrence to the fullest. He subtly endeavours to project the principles
and values of the Indian Freedom Movement to the world community in the right light.

Although the character of Nikhil is not emotively autobiographical like that of Shivraj in *A Situation in New Delhi*, some fine shades of resemblance with Jawaharlal Nehru in bearing, character and vision cannot be overlooked. Some factual details like his ancestral mansion now being a "monument on public display," family callers taking to wearing Gandhi caps, the epithet "Bhai" travel souvenirs including only Chinese collectables, family obsession with Chinese pilgrims, his effervescent younger sister with ample panache (Vijaylakshmi?), his motherless juvenile daughter (Indira?), a reigning beauty of Hindi cinema sending him her photograph (Devika Rani?), a family servant fighting the assembly elections, friendship with thinkers like Henry Thoreau, his relationship with a Western woman, and most significantly his passionate involvement in the freedom movement give the reader a feeling of the literary ghost of Nehru lurching in the deep profound corners of the book; even though, the details of the plot, other than historical records, are largely imaginative and there is fine fictional transcendence of fact into fiction. So, it is hardly surprising that Nikhil, the epitome of civility, "who in Sa'di's words, would by his honey tongued gentleness "manage to guide an elephant with hair of (13), is able to persuade his colleagues when their tempers were sky-rocketing in humiliation for being dragged to war like animals, by reasoning that "of freedom itself dies, what will be left for us to claim our share of? Is there any history that is not the history of us all? (151)

Several streams of thought merged together to instill the spirit of freedom in the masses of India and they find appropriate representation in the novel. Eknath, the witty skeptical lecturer of History, was an admirer of "the patriot who had escaped the British authorities and flown out of India to seek German and Japanese help against the British to raise an army abroad (206). The polarization of the struggle had started with Subhash Chander Bose adopting a more aggressive position and may have had the colonizers re-think
their policies but his mysterious death left behind a few historical puzzles. While the double standards of the British, with a separate yardstick of freedom for their own race and another for the "lesser breeds," were exasperating to Indian self-respect, the Indian leadership under the aegis of Gandhi remained persistent on the path of Satyagraha. When Eknath approached Bhai, for his consent for party workers to get trained in guerilla training camps of the Allied forces for an armed rebellion later on, Bhai was firm in not turning his back on a movement that had galvanized Indians in the first place and said briefly, "I have been delivering another message for too long. Besides such a thing as habit, twenty-one years of it. I find it hard to break. Killing needs a frame of mind I don't have anymore." (210).

Landmarks of colonial history are the unifying force of Sahgal's fiction in general, and the *Lesser Breeds* in particular. They constantly appear through reflections, flashbacks, contrasts, references, re-visionist attitudes fortifying the structure of a narrative spread over the continents of Asia, America and Europe in the era of anti-colonialism and the second war. At the risk of documenting historic evidence, one of the characters, Mr. Harvey, a pyjama-kurta clad sympathetic Angrez, cites Churchill on Mahatma Gandhi: "the nauseating and humiliating spectacle of this onetime Inner Temple lawyer, now seditious fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the viceroy's palace, there to negotiate and parley on equal terms with the representatives of the King-Emperor." (41). The Western media's misrepresentation and misinterpretation of Gandhi may have been the propaganda of World War II leaders of the Allied forces, including Churchill, and a repercussion of British foreign policy cleverly framed to build a case against the Indian leaders to watch its own colonial self-interests. An American editor and Edgar Knox's boss, Sam, sums up the unanimity of the opinion of the American press on the issue of Indian leadership:

When Gandhi makes the front pages here the *New York Times* calls him an appeaser of Japan and a dabbler in international intrigue with a moral stature
equal to Franz von Papen. The *Chicago Tribune* calls him a stooge mahatma
and the *Washington Post* says Indian leaders are traitors to civilization. (172)

The underlying thrust of Said’s study in *Culture and Imperialism* has been the
conscious building up of cultural constructs by the imperialistic forces to perpetuate
dominant ideologies. Sahgal has subtly woven into the texture and tone of the novel a sense
of subversive and ironical thought process. There are echoes of the Saidian thought
throughout the novel but at times the message is driven home quite remarkably, for example,
when Nurullah allegorically explains to his protégé, Shan: A man called Petruchio made
[Katherina] captive and broke her spirit. She had to start calling the sun the moon because he
said so. That is what happens when Petruchios rule the roost. Anything goes(123). Changing
certain points of view, decolonizing the mind, inculcating a sense of inquiry towards the past
and the present is not just an ongoing process for Shan and Nurullah but for generations of
readers in times to come.

The absolute arbitrariness in the selection, organization and interpretation of historical
data, that is a subject of much theorization by historians, is one of the leitmotifs in the story
that constantly cautions against the manipulations in historical narratives. The crisp, witty
heart-felt observations of the characters flow through the novel like a poetic cascade narrating
the lamentable fictionalized construction of our identity. Nikhil Bhai wants to put an end to
the use of imperialistic rhetoric and in an inspirational flash explains to Eknath and the rest:
You are using the language of those who tell us we are their creation. From a formless void
they created us a nation and trained us like good dogs to bark and beg for freedom.
Democracy they tell us is Athenian. Love is Christian. Freedom is a bargain. We must go on
passing tests till we are Greek enough to merit it(208). As a matter of fact, a hark to
decolonizing the Oriental mind, a clarion call to a truer understanding of the Indian roots/past
mingle to make the text a hopeful symphony in print. A return of the natives to an identity
Kaur 149

"not trained in Hellas but with foundations in an antiquer antiquity is tour de force that strengthens the mind and the movement. Bhai sermons on the connection between colonialism and a genuflected emulation of its culture: "The world we live in and all its arrangements have been designed by other people for their convenience, not ours. It should appeal to our poetic instincts to remould it nearer to the heart's desire (107). The classic example of cultures/nations being silenced or rather obliterated in history is Nurullah's realization of his inability to explain to young Shan the past of America in BC \(1\) Everything began After Columbus[] (118).

*Lesser Breeds* is a powerful prism through which, multiple graphics on legendary personalities, historic failures, significant happenings, social practices crowd on the mind of the reader, leaving it free to settle for any or a combination of as many of those myriad images. This ironic deconstruction, in the pedagogic reflections of Nurullah, of the persona of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, may not suit the ideologues in the Muslim world today as it shatters the mythic quality bestowed upon him for the purpose of rallying West Asia around Islam:

Jinnah Sahib who should have known better at his advanced age was hankering for a non-existent [homeland] and that too For Mussalmans Only, when his home has been a luxurious villa in cosmopolitan Bombay. It could be that as a Khoja disciple of Aga Khan, a wealthy gentleman who spent his time on the French Riviera and married foreign wives, Jinnah Sahib wanted to prove himself more of a proper Mussalman. History has others like him who hankering for more identity than they were born with had endangered life and limb on a colossal scale. Napoleon had been born Corsican and Hitler Austrian. (160)
Bhai, dauntlessly works towards the impossible task of relating economics to politics for his simple countrymen. Indigenous industries were not allowed to flourish in India so that the economic empires of those abroad were not threatened. Nurullah, on a clandestine mission to hand over Bhai’s letter to Edgar, noticed the early onslaught of neo-colonialism on India at the Ghasvalas party in Bombay, as a ōman not far from him greeted another, introducing himself as Wheelcock, Imperial Jute. The other replied Jackson, Shell. Imperial Tobacco and Imperial Chemicals joined them. Clues to a larger identity, obviously as maharajas considered themselves Mysore or Baroda(139). So the political fiefdoms were in the process of metamorphosing into capitalistic empires. History was now beginning to be scripted by the US, with a total indifference to the history and past of other nations - Knox sums up the theory of his nation’s slumber from which it needed to rouse itself:

*He believed the Americans were more affected by their popular music than any other people on earth and the ‘dimpled blond syrup’ that was being served up as daily doses- ‘I’m gonna buy a paper doll’, ‘Boohoo, you got me cryin’ for you’ – would vaporize the country’s intelligence. He worried about what it would do to America’s foreign policy after the war. The three baby atom bombs America kept ready for French to use at Dien Bien Phu - though Vietnam won that war too fast for their use - convinced him of worse misjudgements to come.* (347)

So, the title of the second section of the novel ōAn Island Called America appears apparently has nothing to do with the geography of the USA and is clearly intended as a pun. It is a literary jibe at the ahistorical attitude of the Americans with a complete disregard for deep understanding of global affairs. As recently as the 2007 US presidential elections, Sarah Palin, the Republican party candidate running for vice-president, became the butt of media ridicule for her admission that she knew enough about world affairs as she could literally see
Russia from her home state of Alaska! This instance of political naiveté reflects the collective conscience of a global community complacent in its own achievements and is symptomatic of a mental lethargy and a social and political indifference towards nations it actually claims to lead. In *Lesser Breeds* Sahgal has included a complete treatise on the social and cultural mannerisms of the Americans in the eventful decade of the 1940s, which incidentally coincides with the period of her own stay in the States. What is of interest to this research project, in this section of the story, is the unsuccessful effort of Edgar Knox, a close friend and admirer of Nikhil Bhai, in persuading the American leadership to see the Indian National Movement in its true light as a beacon of freedom and in preventing the persecution of Nikhil and the rebelling peasant masses. This sad juncture in the Indo-US ties is fictionally crystallized in the hanging of Bhai by the British government in India. But there are more optimistic strands woven into the script with Shan being sent to America to imbibe more about the values of justice, equality and freedom, the hallmarks of that society. She is, now, a protégé of Leda Knox, sister of Edgar, who is a translator of German and French manuscripts for a leading publishing house and interestingly also a collector of fairy tales. For a story to have a happy ending one must decide where to end it and *Lesser Breeds* is wrapped up with a marriage of the minds—Leda and Nurullah tie the knot symbolizing the literary clasp between the two nations. The research scholar, Pete Ryder, visiting India in the 1960s to study the philosophy of Ahimsa, is a reminder of America waking up to discover the great past of the country for a possible promotion of the brotherhood of mankind. Ironically, in retrospect, Indians themselves seem more skeptical about the efficacy of the tool just by itself, as Nurullah tells Ryder that in a world comprising of Europe and the lesser breeds that Europe had a right to rule, an Armed or unarmed revolt made no difference to that right. Only war and its fortunes drove Europe out(153).
Knox does all he can to reveal the beauty, ethnicity and suffering of the East to the West but the knowledge of the subject had already been etched on their minds through British, Dutch and French handouts in spite of enjoying the confidence of Franklin D. Roosevelt he struggles with the media to change perceptions in favour of the colonized Asian countries especially India. He argues for independence for Vietnam, Indonesia, Indo-China, Burma and India without delay, in the midst of the war, to lessen the loss of life amongst the colonized and for their support for the Allied forces. I tell you these are legendary times in Asia and these men [Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh] are living legends, heroes to their people. Now is the time to befriend them (173) he presses with his editor Sam Sullivan. Traveling to India for the third time, having covered the Dandi March and the Bengal famine previously, he is granted an audience with the governor of the United Province, Sir Humphrey Hartley. He discreetly confronts through metaphors, fairy tales and proverbs the condescending imperialistic British opinion of the 1857 Mutiny, the farmers’ rebellion, Gandhi, Frontier Gandhi, the annexation of Burma and other issues related to the political dilly-dallying regarding setting up of the provisional Indian government. His Excellency after recounting the fortitude and resilience of the British in setting up the Empire in conditions far removed from being sanitized to the disappointment of Edgar, betrays an attitude that is clearly racist: Western civilization is a distinct biological and cultural unit, so Europe has a meaning within those terms unlike Asia which is without the binding factor of race, culture or religion (189).

Edgar Knox symbolizes the Indo-US relationship. It was beginning to blossom under Roosevelt and was silenced to a thud under the presidency of Truman, as was Edgar - condemned to professional ruin and oblivion. His passport was confiscated for ten years and he was labeled a communist by the Senate Committee for Internal Security. Akin to the plight of Knox, India’s commitment to socialism and non-alignment kept it in the US radar of
suspicion for the longest time especially in the cold-war phase of history. Knox could relate to great Indian statesmen like Nikhil Bhai for he was a lover of mankind. And of Jazz (348). His writings were the voice of sanity for he abhorred watching America take up the white man’s burden and become the new Colonial Power (345).

Political liberation does not bring economic liberation - and without economic liberation there can be no political liberation (Young 5) - the demonic arms of imperialism have spread through control over resources, technology and markets of the ‘tricontinent’. The narrative of the meddlesome politics of oil in West Asia is objectively scripted by Knox with all the perilous forebodings it holds for the global community. The British oil companies, by opposing the nationalization of the Iranian oil resources by its government, once again pioneered the evil imperialistic design of working towards the ‘westward flow of oil’ and the sad saga of oil on the earth has ever since shifted from one Arab nation to another. Sahgal has announced with her convincing flair for politics the entry of a new player into the recognizable team of exploiters - ‘Uncle Sam’.

Alluding to geographical terminology once again, Sahgal has titled the brief final section of the novel ‘Trade Winds’. The scene has now shifted from America to Switzerland in Europe, where Eknath is serving as the Indian ambassador, and the time is 1966. Nurullah on his way back from New York makes a de tour to stay overnight with Eknath in Geneva to catch up with his dear argumentative friend of the yesteryears. In a single outburst on the questions he has to face as an ambassador of a newly formed nation, constantly being written off by western cynics, Eknath sums up the firm foundation of the foreign policy in his hit-back style:

‘Why haven’t you joined our military pact against communism?’ ‘Because we don’t want cold war, hot war, holy war or unholy war?’ ‘When are you going to get off the fence, and get into line?’ ‘Ya Allah, as you would say,'
Nurullah, did you ever know an Indian to get into line? Why haven’t you thrown open your markets to our manufacturers? Because we are manufacturing our own, from nothing to everything at long last. I tell you it is a belly ache representing India… I’m a schoolmaster stuck with retarded kids or a heretic being simmered in oil by inquisitors. (362)

Sahgal captures the momentum of the East-West polarization in global thought after the diffusion of the cold war between America and the USSR. This divide is backed by political, economic, social and cultural history and in spite of all the intermingling and merging of the races in the global village retains its racist overtone. History is being constantly re-read and Europe as its hero has been de-throned, or rather it is the ideological villain of postcolonial chapter of history. Sahgal has come out more forcefully against the West than she did in her previous works. Sipping tea in the Swiss hotel, recalling the pre-independence scald and sparkle of Robin da’s tea sessions Eknath gauges the two: The West is still The World, yaar, makes the rules, calls the shots, not in the old way, - you keep the mountain, I’ll take the sea - but nevertheless nothing changed (361). With Eastern Europe and Russia having receded into the background the West is now synonymous with the capitalistic forces dictating the new rules of trade. Shan, who is now the commerce minister of India, having appropriated the mantras of economic prosperity from the US, puts forward the Asian Trade Doctrine in New York which is carped as a hemispheric policy hostile to the west that would disrupt time honoured patterns of commerce worldwide. Shan hit it home when she said to the US analyst that it is disappointing you are reacting like the mighty Metternich did to your Monroe doctrine. The novel ends on a pessimistic note with Shan, Knox and her delegation getting killed in an air crash on the Alps marking the end of the beginning of hope. Nurullah wraps up his final meeting with Pete Ryder with a dark prophesy:
The roughest chapter of trade is about to begin. Oil and allied treasure will exact a more terrifying price than pepper, gold and nutmeg, or teak and diamonds ever did. Asia, and who knows Africa, will be the battlefields for times immemorial. (369)

The prophesy has, sadly, come true. *Lesser Breeds* is a literary testimony to the fact that history is a narrative, just as fiction is an inlay on the web of the past. The plot is unambiguously part fiction part history. Eknath, the historian, and Nurullah, the litterateur enact out "History-Fiction" debate through the vagaries of their lives in the historic, happening town of Akbarabad, named after Akbar, the symbol of Indian secularism. The two academicians contradict, disagree and debate issues often, for they enjoy the idiosyncrasies produced in their beings by their respective disciplines. Their sparkling bond coalesces the fusion of the two disciplines without any closure of arguments. In the novel, fiction is spread on the canvas of history, placing Indian history in the right perspective within the totality of world history, reasoning out why things happened the way they happened, and in some instances why they should be stopped from happening the way they are happening.

The narration of history on an epic scale in the thematic trilogy of the colonial experience - *Plans for Departure, Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser breeds* - affirms Sahgal's subliminal connection with events that shaped the world around her. Much of what was history for others was an everyday reality for her. Yet, even in getting to know one's reality, the diffusive spirit of the times exercises vast influence. The impossibility of knowing the past objectively is being widely accepted, validating the influence of Foucault's suggestion in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, that events do not dictate history, history dictates events. The historian can never stretch back enough to encapsulate truthful reality, as the arbitrariness, subjectivity and social construction of language operates
at the deepest level of human consciousness at all times - the shared assumptions of his own age await the addition of another dimension through him.

In the case of Sahgal, the present itself was history, but that does not mean that the author could narrate it by escaping the inherent paradoxes of history or operate outside the mainstream conventions of figurative language. Evolving her own method which is neither purely empirical nor radically experimental, the writer has forcefully given her dissensions, acquiescence or status quo perceptions of colonial history. Far from effacing her opinion on the subjects she undertakes to study, Sahgal’s perception of history is interventionist and there is a marked philosophical self-reflexivity on all issues discussed in her novels. In concurrence with Vico and Nietzsche, Foucault celebrates this "impositionalism" by narrators and observes in his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" that "history should be explicit in its perspective and should acknowledge that its perception is slanted, being a deliberate appraisal, affirmation or negation" (139-164). Sahgal as a writer has held her own in difficult times, by not giving in to those in power, and preventing the misuse of the legitimating authority of history to further self-serving ideological ends. This appraisal of the three significant texts finds that Sahgal is a vital link in the grand tradition of the philosophy of history.