

The Political Journey of Nayantara Sahgal: Stepping Outside of the Frame

Dr.Podalapalli Babu
M.A.,M.Phil.,Ph.D.,

Lecturer In English Govt., Degree College For Men (A) Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh
drpodalapalli@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Nayantara Sahgal's work is marked by a strong sense of political awareness and therefore it is of more than passing relevance to raise the question how and what kind of colonial consciousness is projected in her work. To begin with Sahgal grew up in Gandhi's family in India and in a family connected with the freedom struggle and later went to a university in the United States. Both Gandhi's India and the United States of America were outside British imperialism and each in turning away from Britain had defined freedom in indigenous terms. Gandhi had effected a break with the present by turning towards the past, by projecting the idea of a Ram Rajya and by using the concept of non-violence integrated in Jain philosophy. Gandhi also turned to asceticism so necessary to overcome the sense of economic deprivation and made satyagraha a powerful substitute for an armed struggle. America, unlike India, was a land of prosperity and freedom. It was yet not conscious of its own imperialistic stance and looked upon itself as a country which promised equality in full measure. India and

America were very different, but they shared their opposition to colonialism.

Key words: strong sense, colonial consciousness, imperialism, indigenous terms, deprivation, colonialism.

INTRODUCTION :

Colonialism or colonial consciousness is in itself a turn which needs to be defined. Edward Said in *Orientalism* has stressed the limitation which colonial consciousness imposes on a nation. One looks at oneself through the eyes of others and judges one by their standards by measuring oneself against their yardsticks. There is a desire to adopt what is handed out. In India this first phase of acceptance coincided with the liberal stance of the Indian nationalists at the turn of the century but in Gandhian India it was replaced by a rejection of the Western model which may be considered as the second phase of rejection. Sahgal records this in *From Fear Set Free* (1962) when she refers to the period when the Congress Party was a "loyal opposition" to His Majesty's Government and her grandfather had

a son at Harrow and a daughter entrusted to an English governess. But with Gandhi's coming, the younger generation had become "acutely conscious" of its Indian heritage.

Colonial consciousness may thus be said to consist of two stages, one of acceptance of the imperial model and the other a turning away from it. Both are dependent and unbalanced relationships. The third and final stage is a moving away from these secondary positions to a position of critical identification of one's own culture, of being in a position to sift and to criticize, a stance which is marked by an adult maturity. This may be said to be a transition to the post-colonial awareness, which is characterized by an ability to step outside the given and to reject simplistic divisions of the 'good' and 'bad', and to forge an independent identity.

Sahgal's early works appeared in a free country, in post-independence India. *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1962) are autobiographical accounts of the forties. *Time To Be Happy* (1958) and *This Time of Morning* (1955) are fictional accounts of the same period. Sahgal, as a writer and as an individual, perhaps never did experience the first phase of acceptance of the Western model. In arriving at this stage an influence which she does not so directly talk about is the influence of her father Ranjit Pandit, (as a character Ranjit Pandit is a recurring figure in her

fiction, the most recent one being that of Sonali's father in *Rich Like Us* for the influence in Motilal Nehru's home may not have been so single-minded.

Very often these early works tend to simplify complex issues. Sanad's family on one hand and Kusum's on the other in, *Time To Be Happy* represents the two facets of colonial life Divisions into Gandhian India and its structure of values as these stand opposed to the loyalist materialist, go-getter group appear to be well-demarcated. But the country's freedom, Gandhi's assassination and the need to accept the partition of the country present their own complexities. No longer is it possible to go back in time or spirit and it is necessary to relate to more harsh world of everyday life. It is a growing awareness of this complexity which begins to surface towards the end of *This Time of Morning*. Kailas Vrind and Kalyan Sinha both have similar goals but different ways of setting about the task. Who, amongst them, is the better neocolonial?

Nations, like individuals, find it difficult to retrace happenings. History while it is open to re-viewing and re-interpretation, still persists in living in the present Colonial countries by becoming free or acquiring independence cannot completely undo the social and political structures they inherit and neither can they smoothen the rough edges they may have acquired for purposes of survival. Continuity,

in national lives, is a broken continuity. The bureaucracy, the cultural uncertainty and the failure of sincerity as a political method are part of the narrative in *This Time of Morning*. These are however further heightened and accentuated in *Storm in Chandigarh* and *The Day in Shadow* (1971). It is in these novels that the binary structure of the two early novels are replaced by more complex structures.

One of the methods which Sahgal uses for projecting her awareness of the colonial hangover is her criticism of the work ethics, of the bureaucracy, and the hardened religious postures. *This Time of Morning* is about an India which is difficult to understand. Beginning with Rakesh and his diplomatic service, it takes one from the citadels of power to the real makers of it, the shrewd political forces, the planners and manipulators and the "farcical extremes brought about by caste, religions, regional and linguistic differences". *Storm in Chandigarh* continues this analysis. There are fewer characters as compared with *This Time of Morning*, but the human relationships are far more complex. For years critics have looked at *Storm in Chandigarh* and *The Day in Shadow* as autobiographical novels dealing with marital problems. But the novels are political novels, the marital problems helping to underline the political problems. Saroj and Inder are a compatible couple in all respects except one. And this is when Inder's

masculine spirit of possession clashes with Saroj's sense of personal freedom. For Inder, marriage implies an imperial control, for Saroj the relationship is one of equality. It is impossible to find fault with Jit for adopting a low profile, or with Mara or turning to Inder. They are human beings who fail to be clamped down into categories. The political problem has similar dimensions but different results. The desire to control can be a self-destructive desire: the inability to act can in itself be a political disaster. The passive spectators are equally to blame as the aggressive go-getters. From this point of view, Vishal and Jit are as guilty as Inder, Gyan Singh as guilty as Harpal.

Central to the novel and its colonial consciousness is the comment upon the political situation and the lack of commitment on part of the human beings involved. When Dubey and Trivedi discuss *Bhagavad Gita*, they are not simply discussing religion but instead they are commenting on the gap between the past and the present, between ethics and morality, and between action and inaction. Men of Trivedi's generation had worked for the 'other,' while most of Dubey's contemporaries worked for 'self.' They are a different breed insensitive, power hungry and status conscious. The message of the *Gita* has never been properly interpreted and

the theory of Karma had become a passive acceptance of fate whereas it was meant to be an active philosophy. The message of non-attachment was action, of "duty unallied to reward. A job to be done".

Stonn in Chandigarh is, in many ways, a disturbing book, for the India which it projects is not a very comforting place, and the division of Punjab into two states carries forward the act of the country's division on a smaller scale. Suddenly what had been adequate for the freedom struggle is no longer adequate for a free country, and somehow the men who rule India appear to be different from the ones who had worked for freedom. In some ways there is an element of nostalgia which in itself is a colonial attitude. One can see how strong it has been in the eighties for the British with the last of the Anglo-Indians fading away in their country the memories of the Empire were evoked by the media. Paul Scott's *The Jewel Jr. the Crown*, Foresters *Passage to India* and M.M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* caught the imagination of people. *Storm in Chandigarh* reaches out in its nostalgic overtures to examine the present crisis of character, of lack of commitment, of the coming to the forefront of the wrong kind of values: for, as Trivedi's says, countries cannot be governed by a vague system of ethics unless it is ingrained in the very being

of men. "Where", Trivedi asks Dubey, "is the evidence now that those scriptures can inspire a people to live?"

Ethics is related in differing measures to religion, to education and to the system of social values. All three of these could be faulted in the context of the developments in post-independence India. In fact the confusion in the country was in itself a result of the average Indian's inability to outgrow a colonial consciousness, to define goals and aspirations materially different from what had gone before. The problems in *The Day in Shadow* (Bell Books, 1971) are the problems of a country unable to come out of the quagmire of a colonial experience. Political and social events were completely divorced from moral considerations. Gandhi and his name were merely useful words for keeping up appearance and for evoking an emotional response. Hinduism was as abstract and vague as ever, unable to provide any basis of social action. It was riddled by inner contradictions, its caste system, its social grading, its passivity and now in 1969 in the year of Gandhi's centenary, the communal violence which rocked the country.

Raj and Simrit in the *The Day in Shadow* are not just a man and a woman sorting out the emotional mess, but they are two human beings each trying to find meaning in the

larger mess around them. It was not the final goal but the process which was important. Problems had just begun: with dislocations, with short ages, with the inability to define goals, and vagueness of the value structure "full of rotten, elastic standards and the worship of money". India is like Simrit the child of a scholarly and gentle father and an unworldly mother, married young, unable to find out what she really wanted, caught in a situation where aggressive onslaughts from the outside seek to destroy her strength. Like Simrit, India is bewildered by the economic laws and needs, and tries to relate to her numerous children at levels of communication which do not materialise. The question which is raised over and over again is what have we inherited and how do we set about making the best of it.

Sahgal, by the time she wrote *The Day in Shadow*, had come a long way from the initial expression of Gandhian ideas in her early work. The humanistic principles and moral integrity so ardently worked for were finding it difficult to survive in the world which had come into being because of India's colonial experience. This is a period of doubt, of confusion and of uncertainty. A *Situation in New Delhi*, crystallizes the issues and marks the progress of her political journey into the second phase that of attempting to evaluate the situation

objectively no longer as a passive disturbed victim, but as a person capable of assessing it dispassionately. *New Delhi* is a break with the idealism of the past. The catalytic agent is the memory of Shivraj which still lives on in the present. The novel begins with the bald statement "Shivraj was dead", the Vice-Chancellorship of Delhi University, Madhu's rape and consequent suicide and Skinny Jaipal's awakening, and finally Rishad's death in a violent explosion. In fact while the whole process of the novel is towards contrivance, towards manipulation and towards survival no matter at what cost, the end ironically moves back to square one to non-violence. Usman's moves from behind the Vice-Chancellor's desk to identify himself with the students, Devi resigns from her minister ship, Rishad rounds off his Naxalite leanings by his own death, Madhu goes up in flames passing a comment on the situation in contemporary India and Michael recognizes the fact that the human spirit though lost and bewildered still possesses the necessary resilience to survive.

Mistaken Identity appears to be at first sight the story of Bhushan, a princeling disowned by his father, educated in the West, in love with, a Parsi woman, born at the turn of the century, and finally in prison held on charges which are vague and amorphous. He

shares his prison cell other political prisoners belonging to different ideological groups. Together they are up against the colonial rule which is blind, unfeeling, unthinking and ponderous. And as they move from one trial to another, they realize that reason has hardly any role to play in their relationship. Finally, the trial comes to an end. Bhushan is a free person but by this time he has lost his Parsi girl friend and is at a loose end. His final return to his hometown, his mother's runaway marriage to a Muslim comrade, his own to comrade's daughter is a bizarre but befitting ending to the story. It is at this juncture that it becomes clear that Bhushan is the young India, long desired and wanted, held captive in political and bureaucratic entanglement set free only by the flight of his mother which breaks the spell. The final union is the union of opposing forces: the royal princeling and the daughter of a communist,

the Hindu with the Muslim, the conservative confined Rani to the freedom-loving comrade. The solution to India's problem is this marriage of opposites, of contraries not merely the upholding of truth in the singular.

References

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