

# Gender Identification and Socio-Political Equality in Nayantara Sahgal

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**Abstract – Sahgal has first-hand knowledge of politics and political figures in India, for she spent most of her childhood in Anand Bhawan, the ancestral home of the Nehrus in Allahabad. It is beyond doubt that politics is in her blood. Jawaharlal Nehru was her mother's brother, while her father died because of an illness he suffered in prison when he was jailed for participating in India's freedom struggle. The important political events form the background for each of her novels.**

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## INTRODUCTION

As Sahgal herself comments, I am a novelist and a political journalist. My novels have a political background or political ambience. I didn't plan it that way — I was dealing with people and situations — but looking back, each one seems to reflect the hopes and fears the political scene held out to us at the time. In the course of a lifetime one is many things, fiction is my abiding love, but I need to express myself on vital political issues. Political and social forces shape our lives. How can we be unaware of them? I believe there is a "poetics of engagement" where commitment and aesthetics meet and give each other beauty and power. Sahgal's novels present obviously a chronological account of Indian politics from the last phase of the freedom struggle to the breakdown of democracy in mid-seventies. She herself explains that politics is embedded in her "bones and marrow",<sup>3</sup> and in her "emotional and intellectual make up"<sup>4</sup> to such an extent that she can no longer remain a mere passive spectator to the happenings. Her family — parents, cousins, uncles and aunts were very actively engaged in the country's struggle for freedom and were at the centre-stage of the Indian politics — "All around them political and moral ideas were being discussed and formulated and the girls were a part of it.

If it was Nehru's idealism which has influenced her political stance, it is her own father's gentleness and courage which has influenced her moral stance."<sup>5</sup> Sahgal has earned a name for herself as a keen and fearless political commentator. Sahgal's writing is famous for keeping in touch with the latest political ups and downs with a tinge of Western liberalism. Her novels truthfully mirror the contemporary Indian political theme. Her attitude in the novels is tantamount to that of Nehru that is co-mingled with the Western outlook. Unlike the other political writers,

she never professes any specific political ideology or favouring any political creed or political movement. All her major characters of the novel are centripetally drawn towards the vortex of politics. She herself comments: Politics was, of course, my background, and my environment, and it became my natural material. I grew up at a time when literature and politics went hand in hand, and helped to illumine and interpret each other. It was a time when songs, poems and stories were the focus for the struggle against foreign rule. Who can forget the songs: "Sar faroshi ki tamanna aaj hamare dil mein hai; and there was a song in the streets of Allahabad when I was a child, Bharat ka danka aalam mein bajwaya veer Jawahar ne — azaad bano, azzad bano, kahwaya veer Jawahar ne. But I am not a political animal myself, and my political philosophy is very simple. I do not believe in kings, queens, or political dynasties. I have no ideology. I've never belonged to a political party. But in this country, politics — if by that we mean the use and misuse of power — invades our lives every day, both at the private, domestic level, and at the national level".<sup>6</sup> Sahgal's novels weave aspects of India's social, political, and cultural history into their narrative framework and subject them to a close critical examination.

The period covered is roughly between the 1930s, when there was a mass awakening in the country to rise and revolt against the British empire, and the time of emergency in 1975. Her novels make covert and some rare overt references to significant political happenings, especially the novels she wrote during 1970s and 1980s; critics have also considered her a political novelist or a novelist with political consciousness. She deals with issues related to historical reconstructions more self-consciously.

In her earlier novels too she combines personal and public history by intertwining the past of individual lives with India's historical past. She has been the

turmoil both before and after the independence in 1947. Sahgal writes in her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake*: "Our growing up was India's growing up into political maturity — a different kind of political maturity from any that the world has seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace".<sup>7</sup> In her novels, on one hand, she exposes the power-hungry politicians and their vaulting power-ambition and on the other, she highlights the ardent freedom fighters and their sacrifices for their motherland. She says, "The heroes in my novels were patterned on pre-independence examples and the villains on contemporary personalities."<sup>8</sup> In all her works there is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. Her observations of the universal behaviour and reactions of the people, her humour and her depiction of the changing social conditions in contemporary India are quite interesting.

The major themes in Sahgal's novels are socio-political backdrop of the country, East-West encounter, man-woman relationship and man's quest for identity. Her fiction also focuses attention on Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and selfrealization. The important political events form the background for each of her novels. Her first novel, *A Time to Be Happy*, presents the dawn of Indian independence.

*This Time of Morning* comes later, when the initial euphoria has worn off. *Storm in Chandigarh* deals with the partition of the Punjab on linguistic lines just when the state had recovered from the trauma of the 1947 partition. *A situation in New Delhi* presents the Naxalite Movement and student unrest and moreover, the aftermath of Nehru's death. Her autobiographies, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free* are more effective than her earlier novels. *The Day in Shadow* is profusely inspired by the political movement of the society. Sahgal gives an authentic picture of high-profile politicians and bureaucrats, wrapped up in their cocktail parties, worried more about themselves than about the problems that the country face.

Her novels are concerned with the present decadence of India, and how creative use can be made of its past. It is this concern with the country which led her to protest against the Emergency imposed by her cousin Indira Gandhi. Sahgal wrote her first volume of autobiography to the time of the publication of her latest novel. She has shown interest in the history and culture of her country. The two autobiographical works, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free*, present the changing social and political climate of the times in which she grew up. She describes what it was like growing up with her uncle; Jawaharlal Nehru during the years of Mahatma Gandhi's prolonged freedom movement. They also provide clues about the essential core of

her thinking which informs her understanding of India's past, which she constantly invokes in her later novels, to make sense of the post-independence times. The book was published when she was only 27 years of age. Both the autobiographies become important because they provide the basis for a better understanding of the novelist and her novels. *Prison and Chocolate Cake* presents the powerful associations and experiences of Sahgal's childhood and provides invaluable insight into the shaping influences of her life. The political consciousness, which dominates her literary creations, is real and inseparable from her and surroundings.

In the preface to *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, Sahgal points out: "We grew up at a time when India was the stage for a great political drama and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performances we have seen".<sup>9</sup> In the same book, she writes: With us the growth of political awareness was a gradual and unconscious process and the most important influence in our lives.<sup>10</sup> The book provides evidence of Sahgal's impression of the two most important leaders of modern India, Gandhi and Nehru. The two were household names for her, and the impact of their thoughts and ideas is found in all her writings. Though at first she had contrived a dislike for Gandhi's moral lapses but very soon his rare qualities like compassion, love for all, trust and regards for truth, spiritual uprightness etc. impressed her very favourably. In a very short time, Gandhi became a strong force and an unavoidable presence. In *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, she says: "Our parents were adults when Gandhiji appeared on the horizon. Our children will never see him. They will hear of him, but to them he will be only a name, one of the many illustrious names of Indian history. But we are truly the children of Gandhi's India, born at a time when India was being reborn from an incarnation of darkness into one of light. Our growing up was India's growing up into political maturity...based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace".<sup>11</sup>

Sahgal's second autobiography *From Fear Set Free* depicts an account of events and happenings in Sahgal's personal life. The book chronicles her life in India and abroad and gives some memorable anecdotes of her eminent mother. It incorporates the events from India's social and political history, because of which we get to know more details about her views on several issues, which form the central core of her later fiction. It is the work of a mature married woman with an increasingly clear vision of life. She is still very much under the influence of Gandhi and Nehru. The title sums up the burden of her narrative, which is to demonstrate how the most vital concern of her growing up was to learn to free herself from fear, which had also become the aspiration of the vast majority of people in the country.

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