

IDENTITY CRISIS IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S A TIME TO BE HAPPY

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Nayantra Sahgal is one of the prominent novelists with national consciousness, who recreates the Indian social and political scene just before and after the Independence in India in her writings. The political consciousness which dominates her literary creations explicitly is inseparable from herself and her surroundings. She, being the first Indian woman novelist, wrote novels and political commentaries in English with contemporary Indian political themes. All the novels of Sahgal reflect the contemporary Indian political themes and portray the various social and cultural changes that take place in India. Her work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of a society.

Her novel *A Time to be Happy* has numerous references to Congress activities and the events of 1942 and it also portrays the search for identity of a Westernised Indian youth Sanad, against the backdrop of India's struggle for liberation. The central theme is the awakening of Sanad's conscience and his attempt at success in self-discovery and identity. Sahgal attempts to project a nation's consciousness through the fragmentary consciousness of an individual.

As A. V. Krishna Rao observes in *Nayantara Sahgal: A Study of her Fiction and Non-fiction* "Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps one of our best Socio-political novelists today" (6). Sahgal had first-hand knowledge of politics and political figures in India, for she had spent most of her childhood and adolescence in Anand Bhawan, the ancestral home of the Nehru's in Allahabad. It is beyond doubt that politics is in her blood as Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru was her maternal uncle and her cousin Mrs. Gandhi. His father, being a veteran freedom fighter

who had joined hands with the Nehru's family and others suffered greatly and died in the Indian prisons for the noble cause. It is no doubt that the important political events that had taken place during her life time form the background for her literary works.

Sahgal's major achievement lies in her success as a political novelist who combines her descriptions of accurate and realistic happenings in the corridor of power with keen prophetic foresight to create memorable works. It becomes a choice of not only political beliefs and ideologies but of moral values as well. Her novels present obviously a chronological account of Indian politics from the last phase of freedom struggle to the breakdown of democracy in mid-seventies. As Jasbir Jain in the book *Nayantara Sahgal* says: "All around them, political and moral ideas were being discussed and formulated and the girl was a part of it. If it is Nehru's idealism which has influenced her political stance, it is her own father's gentleness and courage which has influenced her moral stance" (12).

A Time to be Happy, her first novel, is set during the first days of Indian's Independence from Great Britain. The uneven terrain of Indian colonial history is marked by an alliance between nationalism and colonialism, which in a sense secured Indian modernity in the early twentieth century, an era dominated by Gandhian politics. The Nationalist intelligentsia could not remain unaffected by Gandhian ideology. Some people hesitated between loyalty to the British and allegiance to the mother country. In *A Time to be Happy*, the character Sanad swings between these opposite pulls. His redemption comes about after he meets Kusum, through whom he reconnects with his past and cultural roots.

This novel that covers the period from 1932 to 1948 is the story of Sanad, a young, energetic and educated man, against the backdrop of India's struggle for freedom. The locale of the story is Saharanpur, a small town in Northern India having textile industry, mostly

belonging to the British and a few rich Indian businessmen. Though the story occasionally moves to places like Lucknow, Delhi and Calcutta, it is in Saharanpur where the main events take place. The novel is an imaginative recapitulation of things past with a somewhat uncertain attitude towards the present, be it the freedom struggle or the Indo-British relations.

A Time to be Happy has the references to congress activities and events of 1942. The novel presents India's struggle for Independence and changing social-political life of the country presented through the upper middle class. The novel is located in the time immediate after the freedom of our country, but its narrative space is dominated by pre-independence times. The story is narrated through the omniscient observer, who is a middle aged man. The novel unfolds the consciousness of Sanad, the main character, and his search for identity. The narrator believes in Gandhian ideology and he influences Sanad. The protagonist of the novel recalls his past life, especially the changes in his thinking and actions brought about by Gandhi's call to people of India. The narrator's idealism and integrity are the source of strength for Sanad during all crucial moments. It depicts the gradual development of freedom movement and its impact on the pleasure seeking upper class society. It is also based on real facts and can be considered to be as a fictional autobiography of the writer. This is only a fiction which uses the first person narration. The narrator, Sanad, a middle-aged man narrates the story from his recollection.

Sanad's marriage to Kusum coincides with India's Independence in 1947. Kusum feels uncertain about her marital relationship with Sanad, because she feels that he is living in an unreal and make-believe world of Anglo- Indians. The year of India's Independence produces of the changes on the social and political fronts. Through the consciousness of her characters, Sahgal has successfully captured the fragmentation of Indian psyche at the time. The eradication of Zamindari system disturbs father, Govind Narayan. Among the other

characters, KuntiBehen gets involved in rehabilitation of refugees. Only Sanad takes the changes on the social and political scene in stride but Kusum is emotionally affected by the violent and meaningless death of her brother Sahdev. The Anglicized characters such as Girish feel lost in the new set- up. The Anglo-Indian business tycoons are also affected by the new changes.

Nayantara Sahgal's works are coloured by a National consciousness of freedom and self-identity and she evaluates the concepts of freedom and self-identity as a fundamental human value. It is with this underlying idea *A Time to be Happy* came out. It is a realistic novel that describes the problem of freedom and self-identity and the problem of search for a national identity through individual and family canvas of wide experiences. It is being presented through the protagonist, Sanad. As Dr.A.V.Krishna Rao has observed in *Nayantara Sahgal* :

The agonizing self-realization of an upper class Anglicized Indian is given a vivid aesthetic concretion in Sahgal's novel by dramatizing the contemporary consciousness on diverse levees of awareness. NayantaraSahgal's literary sensibility achieves a satisfying novelistic quality in producing socially meaningful fiction. (6)

The idea of individual freedom, freedom of thought, and concern for man are all ideas which she has developed under the influence of Gandhiji. As Dr.A.V. Krishna Rao in *NayantaraSahgal* has observed: "She is still very much under the influence of Gandhi and Nehru but feels artistically and intellectually free to emphasize the essence of their philosophical beliefs" (52).

A Time to be Happy begins with the revelation of Sanad's wish to resign his job from the British firm. The narrator asks Sanad to think twice before the decision is to be taken.

Though Sanad is the inheritor of a leading textile mill, he renounces everything by wearing khadi. From the moment he wears khadi, he decides to follow Gandhi and his principles. His experiences lead him to realize the importance of real individual freedom and real powers rests in serving the society and in upholding human values and human relationships with courage. This realization on the part of Sanad enables him dig out his real self and asserts his identity as a selfless volunteer of Gandhi.

The narrator introduces the family of Shivpal along with other family members; Ammaji, Govind Narayan, the father of Sanad, his wife Lakshmi, his modern brother Harish and his wife Maya. The life of Zamindarism with a battalion of servants and maids reminds us the past feudal system being followed in India. Govind Narayan has been an advocate of British Raj and he does not encourage any change through Gandhian movement. He is even worried over his son's desire to resign the job. But his modern brother Harish feels at home in pair. In his outlook, India is not a land for great man. He seeks pleasure in visiting foreign countries. Maya, his devoted wife, neither approves of her husband's attitude nor rejects it. She calmly allows him to decide. But her love for the country is revealed when she expresses her willingness to join the Rural Development programme organized by the Gandhian volunteers.

Nayantara Sahgal has been influenced by the principles and ideals of Gandhi and the pursuit and policies of Nehru. This kind of everlasting influence has helped her in developing her own views about life. The ultimate aim of a sensible human being is freedom. Life without freedom is like the body without soul. There are many ways and means to attain and sustain freedom. The best possible way advocated and followed by Gandhi is non-violence or resistance without power. Non-violence or Ahimsa includes dialogue and compromise to solve problems of any kind. And to make a compromise, one should have a clear and

unbiased mind. A clear mind can be developed only through self-discovery and self-identity. Self-identity without freedom is like a stone inside the stagnant pond.

The novel takes off from a crisis in Sanad's life, when he seriously mediates with a reputed foreign company to give up his job. Sanad feels ill at ease in the company of his British officers. The relationship between the narrator and Sanad is deeply personal because Sanad absolutely regards him as an idealist whose integrity is extraordinary. Sanad's dilemma about himself is typical in the cross-currents of the East and the West. He explains his problem by saying:

I've studied English history and literature. I've read the English poets. It's all the moral, real to me than the life. I live every day. Don't you see, it has been burned into us. We're branded with it. My body is in India but my brain doesn't belong here. I might as well be an Englishman except for the colour of my skin. (232)

When it is proposed by his company that he be sent to England for advanced training, he sarcastically comments:

'I've always wanted to go to England', he continued,
 'to see what the original is like' 'The Original?' I asked
 'the thing of which I am a carbon copy' he said. (231).

The novel presents that because of immense differences in the levels of living and thinking of its people, there was a simultaneous coexistence of several layers of past incidents in the country, which made people respond differently to the British. They either choose to remain unmoved and fixed like Sanad's father or evolved new ways for combating their influence by invoking a part of their native tradition. Some, like the protagonist, gave up their rich and prosperous life for joining Gandhi's social and political programmes. Others, like Sanad, chose, to follow the British blindly, because they considered it both enlightening and

rewarding a civilized mode of living and an effective road to success. The action of the novel is rounded off with the idea of freedom waiting all over the country. political freedom for the nation in 1947 and personal freedom for Sanad. The narrator as well as the protagonist welcomes the happiness that true freedom can bring. Her *novel A Time to be Happy* not only communicates the illuminated experiences but also extends our consciousness of life's possibilities in terms of freedom and happiness, which are political in nature.

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