

Patriotism in Mistaken Identity by Nayantara Sahgal

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal, considered a political writer deals chiefly with the elite class, expressing feminist issues and having a quest for self-realization. From her early writings to the latter half of her writing career, her heroines epitomize Intense hunger for freedom. Her main concern seems oriented on man-woman relationship In socio- Political atmosphere.

Even then her novels elucidate Historical events well. Mistaken Identity is an adequate instance of historical events, with unabridged patriotism. She portrays an appealing panorama of the patriots; how they were ready to sacrifice their everything, bearing all the tortures and bestowing their lives for the freedom of the country.

Keywords

1. Karma-Last birth's deeds affect the future. 2. Raaj-British rule in India.
3. Satyagrahi- Supporter of Mahatma Gandhi's concept of fighting with peace.
4. Khaddar-Hand woven clothes, made of cotton in India.
5. Take- A tool in a spinning wheel that spins. On which the cotton thread assembles rolling. Or spindle.
6. Fallen-sisters- The patriot's addression for sex workers before independence in India
7. Triveni- A place where the Ganga, the Yamuna, and the Saraswati merge in Allahabad.
8. Tualukdars- Landlords in Mughal and British rule, who collected taxes from a district.
9. Inquilab- Revolution. 10. Zindabad- long live.

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Nayantara Sahgal is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian English Novelist and established political columnist. Born in Allahabad on May 10, 1927, she is the second of three daughters of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijaylakshmi Pandit. We witness a clear stamp of Indian Politics in her writing. Even now she is concerned with contemporary politics as it is clearly visible by the incident of returning her Sahitya Akademy Award, she declared on Oct. 6, 2015, which she received in 1986 for her novels *Rich Like Us* protesting the failure of the state to safeguard Indian cultural diversity, after the murders of M.M. Kalburgi, Narendra Dhabolkar, and Govind Pansare.

All the novels of Sahgal, truthfully mirror the contemporary Indian political theme and portray the various social and cultural changes that took place in India. In all her works, there is a juxtaposition of two worlds, the personal world and the impersonal world. *Mistaken Identity*, published in 1988 in London, presents an authentic picture of India before independence as well as the portrayal of a personal quest for freedom by its characters, both male and female. Undoubtedly it is a political novel imbued with socio-political events in India during the British regime in 1929. The novel depicts the spirit of patriotism through its characters as Bhaiji, Iyer, Sen, Pillai, Dey, Yusuf, Twin brothers and Salt March participants, along with the inner conflict of the narrator, the protagonist, Bhushan Singh and his fate or *Karma* by which he has been arrested for mistaken identity.

Though published after independence, the novel gives us a firsthand experience of the early decades of the twentieth century. It was the time when the country was gradually awakening to nationalism and witnessing unrest, strikes and mass arrests. The novel is a graphic document of the twilight years of the British Raj in India and may well serve as a reference point to many events and actions of the freedom movements. The novel provides a glimpse into Sahgal's hawk eye for details and sound grasp of world history.

In the second chapter of the novel, we get introduced some accused conspirators called Bhaiji, who belongs to the National Congress, Sen, a youth of nineteen, four trade unionists or comrades-Pillai, Dey, Yusuf, Iyer and Twin brothers. From the very beginning the novelist depicts the feeling of patriotism and revolt running high in the veins of these conspirators, as it is found in the description of Bhaiji:

“When the others had spoken the mild old conspirator known as Bhaiji jumped up stammering with emotion and demanded one good reason why anyone should be loyal to a government that had captured the country by wickedness and hung on to it by force.”¹

Comrade Dey, as he was called, was accused of opening a bureau to inform the public about the orient. His reply also gives a view of his patriotic spirit when he replied:

“Someone has to do it’, he said testily. “We only get the news you give us, and you stuff us with news about Europe.”²

This statement of Dey shows the idea, freedom fighters had in their mind.

They wanted to be aware of the world situation so that it could be used to get India free from the clutches of the British Raaj. The persons, related to the active movement wanted to make aware, both the common people and the rulers. As it is exhibited by the views of Iyer, who was charged with going Russia for revolutionary purpose, which he denied but announced that it was one of the items of his agenda before he expired. He admired Russia and wished to leave for Russia as soon as the news of revolution broke through the British censors. Henceforth the novel delineates the real picture of the mental and physical tortures as well as the reactions of the common people and the prisoners inside the prison along with strikes, marches and processions. In the prison Bhaiji represents a ‘Satyagrahi’, the follower of Gandhi and his ideology. Every time he emerged in the novel the epitome of great patriotic or nationalistic feeling, one who could sacrifice everything and could suffer long for country. In support of his intense patriotism here is a description that tells there was a conference in the barrack about their being jailed in their various states. They should have been lodged in Calcutta or Madras or a jail noted for conspiracy prisoners like Lahore or Cawnpore. Here, Bhaiji declared ultimately that shocked others for some time. He said being in jail was an honour:

“Every Indian must get used to going to jail. Let it become our national profession.”³ Though they were from different places, they prop each other to their sole aim patriotism, it is reflected in another description of prison where Dey consoled the youngster, Sen, from his corner when the youth was dejected. He put his hand on his head and convinced that his defence would be their responsibility. Sen was taken into their combined protective custody and began to look less lost and scared. But he was advised that it was necessary to have the right attitude for suffering. Thus in a very pleasant way the youngster Sen got prepared to suffer everything without losing his heart.

A separate ideology is given by the voice of Pillai. His main concern is shown in support of workers and labourers. During a discussion about conspiracy to root out the sovereign power of the emperor. He declared:

“Nothing will be allowed to sabotage the economic struggle of the workers.”⁴

Pillai even condemns Gandhi’s trade union ideology, saying :

“Workers don’t need advice from Gandhi and his mill-owning capitalist friends.”⁵

This statement serves as the manifesto of a different kind of nationalism that was in support of the common working-class i.e. ‘Indian-mass’, impressed by the revolutions out of India that advocated the rights and freedom of the working class. But ultimately that was too in support of Indian nationalism as it is well known that the working class represents the real India, without their liberty, India could not be considered independent. They also supported a no-tax campaign.

The novel represents another important rolled-out ideology that was ‘Spinning’ and making ‘Khaddar’ and hand-woven cotton clothes. It is projected via

Bhaiji, who is in prison, never lounges. He takes his ‘takli’ out of his tin trunk whenever he finds spare time. On alternate days he spins on his spinning wheel which folds up small and lies in his trunk. The tiresome twins too, take turns at it. It was a way of patriotism, in that form such people felt honoured themselves while doing so. As Gandhiji had instructed them to spin and use hand woven clothes. Outside, the activists went village to village and home to home to advise the people to use cotton clothes and throw the English clothes outside and destroy them. This nationalistic emotion seems at its pinnacle when there is a description of persuading ‘fallen-sisters’-the prostitutes by Bhaiji ‘to spin’ at the daylight when they had a good time to pass. Thus there is a wholeheartedly endeavour to be and to do in the colours of high patriotism. These people were ready to sacrifice their everything to keep burning this flame of patriotism in them. It becomes quite clear when Bhushan, after having arranged a toilet seat, offers his prison mates to use it but they refused at once as it belonged to the English culture.

The episode of Sen’s awakening after the nightmare, appears as another strong example of raised patriotic feeling in the young men. He told his co-prisoners that he was, in a dream, fleeing from Calcutta across the peninsula on the Howrah-Kalka express. At every station he wraps himself up in the sheet from his bedding roll and crouches in the corner of his wooden berth, vigorously shaking his head when a vendor’s hand thrusts in with sweet steaming tea in earthenware or a bunch of ripe bananas. Railway stations like post offices teem with British agents and informers. Though hungry, he thought, better to starve than be picked up by police. At Allahabad the police are so busy controlling crowds of pilgrims and naked bushy-haired straggled-bearded Sadhus on their way to bathe at the Triveni, that he can slip out for a bite without being nabbed. But a policeman

grabbed his shoulder and he, terrified, cried and woke up. Later in the chapter seven the cause of nightmare is told when Bhushan asks Sen:

“So why do you go on having nightmare?”⁶

“Because the day I get out of here they will make me married clerk.”⁷

His soul ached to sacrifice his toughness and strength for the service of the country. He continued asking if that was the time to be married or a clerk. This outlook of the jubilant boy shows his spirit high in nationalism. He does not like to have a normal way of life; rather he wanted to contribute his whole to get freedom. The chain continues as this chapter shows the turmoil when there is the description of Lahore jail, where the prisoners had been on a hunger strike. Authorities tried their best to break those prisoners; they were beaten badly, thrown to the ground, rubbed their faces on prison bars, but they did not bend. Ultimately when they were too ill to sit on the chairs in the court they were stretched on mattresses in the courtroom and when they could not attend court at all the government passed a hunger strike bill so that court proceeding could go on without them. One of those hunger strikers was Jatin Das, who was in very pathetic condition. They were protesting against the treatment they were getting in jail and court. The government used mediators to try to persuade the hunger strikers to eat and Jatin. The Das to take medicine. But Das says he wishes to die for the sake of my country. And on the sixty-first day of his strike he dies, only nineteen the same age as Sen. Both the above-described youth preferred the difficult way of living and ultimately of dying. All of that was done by them due to their high urge for effacement on the altar of the freedom of the country. And what came consequently is also very remarkable, Bhaiji with all prisoners of the Barrack decided to go on hunger strike. Though their second purpose was to win public sympathy, they were ready to suffer more for the changes in the policies of authorities and chances for success were mere. But their high patriotism kept them stable on their decision. They dreamt of a free ideal India that will spin in cottages silk, wool and cotton. Citizens will forgive lust. Independence will be ‘the dawn of an era washed clean of drink and lust’. The death of Das also resulted in the public outcry, huge demonstrations, shop shutters down and also protest hunger strikes in other jails. Another incident of worth attention nationwide occurred in the form of death of Lajpat Rai, shooting on that British policeman and throwing smoke bombs into the Central Assembly, as the result the novel gives a rich description of the bearing spirit of the hunger strikers in the words as Bhaiji and the twin already have a sacrificial glow about them and Sen responds with pleasure. He was still at the stage where a story is as good as food. Sahgal beautifully draws the images of hundreds

and thousands of youths who really suffered a lot happily for the sake of the nation. Later she presents Sen as a youth who was on hunger strike even he was enthralled after listening the story of a film seen and told by Dey, in that he saw about mutiny in the Tsar's Black Sea fleet. Later by the words of Bhaiji there is a detail of freedom fighters fasting once in a week and eating lightly the rest of the week. As Bhaiji comparatively with the rest of them, was cheerful if not spry. He also said that they were then one with the hungry peasants. Such was the feelings of true nationalistic persons in those days. After someday Bhaiji was showing signs of fatigue and failing stamina but it did not keep him from his disciplined schedule of spinning, reading, talking and not-talking at their assigned hours. All that was to maintain their life for the service of the country. Except him, Sen, before the hunger strike, used to exercise and others had stretching exercises. Sen used to sing patriotic songs.

Bhushan and his family members though in the novel are shown separate from this patriotism yet once his mother was heard saying the Commissioner is a mischief-maker. She condemned the British saying that British need a Hindu-Muslim riot now and then, no riot, no Raaj. These words show the concealed feelings of the taalukdaars families for the British authorities.

The novel, entering in a new phase, in the description of the month of April in 1930 gives a lively picture of Dandi March, the incident that covered the whole nation with its eco. Bhushan and his fellow prisoners came to know about Gandhiji who had marched to Dandi beach, a distance of two hundred and forty one miles from his base, to disobey the Salt Act and produce salt on the sea coast. A civil disobedience campaign was in full swing. Newspapers say that immense crowds cheered him on and thousands joined the march. People were making salt in tin pans all over the country. Overnight Bhushan's jail was full of Salt March prisoners. They were with great zeal as the author described them in the words of Bhushan:

“They grasp each other's hands through the bars with outbursts of mutual rejoicing. One of the boys sees me on my cot and calls out to me with a warm appealing courtesy it would be churlish to ignore. My hands, too, are caught in congratulation by each of the boys in turn. They have invited me to clasp hand, but their hand-clasps are more like a fervent unreal embrace. My hands are trembling. I don't know if it's their ardour that makes me so emotional.”⁹

This enthralling description of the volunteers shows the strong and vivid nationalistic fervour of the youths of India. It seems culminated when there was, at night, a baritone across the yard:

“With dear old Gandhi We’ll all march to Dandi And break all the salt laws That a white man ever made.”¹⁰

The whole prison was full of the echo of hymns and national songs. Almost every prisoner seemed overwhelmed with great patriotic zeal. They were repeating various slogans in thundering voice as:

“Mahatma Gandhi ki jai.” “Inquilab zindabad.”¹¹

That night the police behaved with its cruelty at zenith. They beat prisoners badly with horse whips and with the butt of rifle. At last they fired and a salt march prisoner died and Sen was also found missing. Later, Bhaji got very weak, unable to move, still he refused to file a petition for parole or to see a doctor. Ultimately he also died, stuck with his Satyagrahi Principles. He represented a khaddar worker whose motto was ‘clothe nation in khaddar.’ And finally the novel presents Yusuf who after being free, passing a long time reached Vijaygarh to establish Sen-centre in a ruined property. In there they would be executing the nationalistic activities as Bhushan described.

In there they’ll be subverting the young holding banned meetings, discussing defiance, chalking out plans to bring repression to Vijaygarh and Vijaygarh abreast with the rest of the country.¹²

Thus the author successfully portrays the freedom fighters as well as common Indians holding the high patriotic Ideas and a live glimmer of Indians struggling for the freedom of the country.

References

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