

From Idealism to Disillusionment: A Study of Values in Nayantara Sahgal's Novels

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Abstract

*This paper examines Nayantara Sahgal's fictional engagement with Indian political history, focusing on her sustained exploration of moral disintegration, democratic crisis, and the search for identity in post-independence India. Through a critical reading of novels such as *A Time to Be Happy*, *This Time of Morning*, *Storm in Chandigarh*, *The Day in Shadow*, *A Situation in New Delhi*, *Rich Like Us*, *Plans for Departure*, *Mistaken Identity*, and *Lesser Breeds*, the study traces Sahgal's narrative movement from contemporary political critique to a retrospective engagement with the past. It argues that Sahgal employs history not merely as a backdrop but as a lens to interrogate present anxieties and ethical dilemmas. Her fiction foregrounds the erosion of Gandhian values, the rise of opportunistic politics, and the fragmentation of national identity. Ultimately, the paper highlights Sahgal's vision of history as a restorative force capable of reimagining ethical and democratic possibilities.*

Keywords

Political Fiction, Post-Independence India, Identity Crisis, Democratic Values, Historical Consciousness, Indian English Literature, Moral Decline

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Nayantara Sahgal occupies a significant position in Indian English literature as a novelist whose works intricately weave political consciousness with literary artistry. Her fiction reflects not only the evolution of post-independence India but also the moral and ideological crises that accompany this transformation. Sahgal's narratives consistently interrogate the decline of democratic values, the fragmentation of identity, and the persistent tension between past ideals and present realities. Through a sustained engagement with history, she constructs a literary space where the past becomes a lens to interpret the present and envision the future.

Beginning with *A Time to Be Happy* (1957), Sahgal situates her narrative within the immediate aftermath of independence, a time marked by optimism yet shadowed by uncertainty. The novel captures the lingering ethos of the freedom struggle, where politics is still closely aligned with ethical responsibility. However, even within this hopeful framework, Sahgal subtly hints at the cracks that would later widen into systemic disillusionment. The narrative suggests that "*freedom had come wrapped in hope, yet shadowed by the burdens of responsibility,*" indicating that independence alone could not guarantee the preservation of moral integrity.

In *This Time of Morning* (1965), Sahgal advances her exploration of post-independence India by portraying a society caught between inherited idealism and emerging political pragmatism. The metaphor of transition -from night to morning- symbolises both continuity and disruption. While independence promises renewal, it also exposes the complexities of governance and the inadequacies of leadership. As the narrative reflects, "*the dawn revealed not clarity but a landscape altered beyond recognition,*" emphasising the ambiguity of progress and the erosion of certainty.

The disintegration of political and social cohesion becomes more pronounced in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), where Sahgal examines the consequences of linguistic division and regionalism. The novel reveals how identity politics can be manipulated to serve personal and political interests, thereby undermining national unity. Sahgal presents a stark critique of leadership, observing that "*power had ceased to be a means of service; it had become an end in itself.*" This shift from service to self-interest marks a critical turning point in her representation of Indian politics.

Sahgal's critique deepens further in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977), where she explores the psychological and ideological consequences of political instability. The post-Nehru era is depicted as a period of uncertainty, characterised by the absence of strong moral leadership. This vacuum is not merely political but existential, affecting the very fabric of society. As one reflection poignantly states, "*the absence was not of a man alone, but of a moral*

centre that once held the nation together.” Through such insights, Sahgal captures the profound sense of disorientation experienced by individuals and institutions alike.

The Emergency of 1975 serves as a crucial backdrop in *Rich Like Us* (1985), a novel that exposes the fragility of democratic structures. Sahgal portrays a society where fear, silence, and complicity replace dissent and accountability. The narrative underscores the gradual erosion of values, suggesting that authoritarianism emerges not abruptly but through a series of moral compromises. As the text suggests, “*silence became the language of survival, and truth a casualty of convenience.*” This observation encapsulates the ethical dilemmas faced by individuals in times of political crisis.

Following this phase, Sahgal’s fiction undergoes a significant transformation as she turns towards the past in search of answers to contemporary problems. In *Plans for Departure* (1986) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988), she revisits the colonial period, exploring the roots of modern Indian identity. This retrospective approach allows her to draw parallels between historical and contemporary realities, emphasising the continuity of certain social and political patterns. In *Mistaken Identity*, the exploration of selfhood becomes central, with the narrative suggesting that “*identity was not a fixed inheritance but a continuous negotiation between past and present.*”

The theme of unity amidst diversity is a recurring concern in Sahgal’s work, reflecting her commitment to a pluralistic vision of India. This vision resonates with Rabindranath Tagore’s ideal of a world “*not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.*” Sahgal reinterprets this ideal within her narratives, presenting characters who strive to reconcile personal identities with broader national and cultural affiliations. Her fiction thus becomes a space for negotiating the complexities of belonging in a diverse society.

In *Lesser Breeds* (2003), Sahgal extends her exploration to global contexts, examining the relevance of non-violence and ethical governance in an increasingly interconnected world. The novel reflects on the enduring significance of Gandhian principles, even as it acknowledges their challenges in a modern context. As one character observes, “*the past was not a distant country; it lived within us, shaping our choices and our failures.*” This statement reinforces Sahgal’s central argument that history remains an active force in shaping contemporary realities.

An important dimension of Sahgal’s fiction is her critique of bureaucratic inefficiency and political opportunism. Her narratives often depict a class of leaders

who prioritise personal gain over public welfare, leading to widespread disillusionment. This critique is particularly evident in her portrayal of post-independence governance, where democratic institutions are often undermined by corruption and incompetence. Sahgal's insight that "*a nation's strength lies not in its institutions alone, but in the integrity of those who sustain them*" underscores her emphasis on moral responsibility.

Another significant aspect of Sahgal's work is her exploration of gender and identity within political contexts. While her earlier novels focus primarily on female protagonists, her later works shift towards more diverse perspectives, reflecting a broader engagement with social realities. This evolution in narrative technique allows Sahgal to present a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between personal and political identities. Her characters often embody the tensions between tradition and modernity, highlighting the challenges of navigating a rapidly changing society.

Sahgal's engagement with history is not merely retrospective but also critical. She does not romanticise the past; instead, she examines it with a discerning eye, identifying both its strengths and its limitations. Her return to the past is motivated by a desire to recover the ethical foundations that have been eroded in contemporary society. This is evident in her suggestion that "*to revisit the past was not to escape the present, but to understand its failures more clearly.*" Through this approach, Sahgal positions history as a source of insight and renewal.

Furthermore, Sahgal's narrative technique evolves significantly in her later works, incorporating multiple perspectives and non-linear structures. This allows her to capture the complexity of historical and political processes more effectively. Her use of memory and retrospection creates a layered narrative that reflects the interconnectedness of past and present. As she illustrates, "*time in her fiction does not move in a straight line; it circles back, insisting on recognition and reckoning.*"

The global dimension of Sahgal's later fiction also deserves attention. By situating Indian experiences within a broader international context, she highlights the interconnected nature of political and social issues. Her critique of global power structures parallels her critique of domestic politics, suggesting that the challenges faced by India are part of a larger global dynamic. This perspective adds depth to her analysis, making her work relevant beyond national boundaries.

An equally compelling dimension of Sahgal's fiction lies in her exploration of the individual caught within the pressures of a politicised environment. Her protagonists are not merely observers of change but participants who must negotiate

their own moral positions within unstable systems. They often confront a quiet but persistent conflict between personal integrity and social conformity. As this tension unfolds, it becomes clear that *“to remain untouched was itself a form of complicity,”* suggesting that neutrality is no longer a viable stance in times of ethical crisis. Sahgal thus transforms the personal into the political, revealing how large-scale transformations are ultimately experienced at the level of individual conscience.

Closely related to this is Sahgal’s engagement with disillusionment as a recurring emotional and ideological condition. Her characters frequently begin with a sense of belief in institutions, in leadership, or in the promise of independence, but gradually encounter the limits of these ideals. This movement from faith to scepticism is not abrupt but layered, shaped by lived experience and repeated disappointments. The narrative voice often reflects this transition, implying that *“what was once held as truth began to dissolve under the weight of reality.”* In this way, Sahgal does not simply depict disillusionment; she traces its formation, making it a central element of her political critique.

Another significant feature of Sahgal’s work is her sensitivity to the language of power and its subtle operations. Authority in her novels is not always overtly oppressive; rather, it often manifests through everyday structures, bureaucracy, social hierarchy, and institutional control. These systems shape behaviour in ways that are both visible and invisible, conditioning individuals to accept certain norms without question. Sahgal’s insight is particularly striking in moments where silence and compliance become normalised, as captured in the idea that *“obedience had learned to disguise itself as order.”* Such observations reveal her deep understanding of how power sustains itself not only through force but through internalised acceptance.

Sahgal also demonstrates a remarkable ability to interweave memory and history, creating narratives that resist linear progression. Her fiction often moves back and forth across time, suggesting that the past is never fully resolved but continues to influence present realities. This temporal fluidity reinforces her central concern with historical consciousness, where remembering becomes an act of interpretation rather than mere recollection. As implied in her narrative approach, *“the past did not recede; it returned, asking to be understood each time differently.”* Through this technique, Sahgal invites readers to reconsider history not as a fixed record but as an evolving dialogue with the present.

Finally, Sahgal’s work can be seen as an enduring search for ethical renewal in a world marked by fragmentation and uncertainty. While her novels often depict decline and crisis, they are not entirely pessimistic. Embedded within her critique is

a quiet insistence on the possibility of recovery of values, of integrity, and of meaningful political engagement. This hope is not idealistic but reflective, grounded in the recognition that change begins with awareness. As her vision ultimately suggests, “*the future depends not on forgetting the past, but on learning how to carry it with responsibility.*” In this sense, Sahgal’s fiction remains not only a critique of its time but also a guide for navigating the complexities of the present.

In conclusion, Nayantara Sahgal’s fiction offers a rich and nuanced exploration of the intersections between politics, history, and identity. Her works trace the trajectory of a nation grappling with the challenges of independence, highlighting the tensions between idealism and reality. Through her engagement with the past, Sahgal seeks to recover the ethical values necessary for a more just and equitable society. Her narratives serve as both a critique of contemporary politics and a call for moral introspection. Ultimately, Sahgal’s work underscores the enduring relevance of history in shaping the present and guiding the future, reminding us that “*the search for identity is also a search for values, and without them, freedom itself loses meaning.*”

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