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## Politics and Nobility in the Works of Nayantara Sahgal

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### **Abstract:**

*Nayantara Sahgal is known for her love for politics and nobility in her works. She took in her compass those areas of life, which were familiar to her and of which she had a direct, personal and first hand experience.*

*My analysis concentrates on her different novels: A time To Be Happy, This Time Of Morning, Rich Like Us etc. and some other sources. By closely examining these works, my project found that she very boldly described the political conditions of India and the socio-political situation in the pre and post-Independent India. The politics which she described in her novels was not only for the politician but it had an all-pervasive influence that affected all aspects of life.*

*The canvas of Nayantara Sahgal's writing was mostly confined to the upper strata of society. The characters in her novels always were wealthy people. They were politicians, business executives, industrialists, administrators, diplomats, etc. The life presented in her works, was the life of an eating, drinking, merry-making, kissing, hugging, dancing and copulating world, with conferences, committees, public meetings, get-together, discussions, seminars, processions, demonstrations, protests, boycotts interspersed with parties and club activities. She also described corruption, nepotism and other vices in Indian politics, bureaucracy and in high class society.*

**Keywords:** *Politics, political events, rampant corruption, Gandhi's national movement, pre and post-Independence, upper middle class*

### **1. Politics and Nobility in the Works of Nayantara Sahgal**

Nayantara Sahgal is a writer of sharpened sensibilities. She has given fiction a new dimension, which incorporates a rich heritage mingled with a strong western impact. Her sensibility can be summarized "In a nutshell" as the Post Independence sensibility. It came into existence in the almost overnight breakdown of scruple and the rise of naked ambition and crass careerism that marked the dawn of the post Independence era. The canvas of her writing is mostly confined to the upper strata of society. She takes in her compass those areas of life, which she has known and of which she has a direct, personal and first hand experience. She explores their domestic arena with competence in the minutest details. She has a deep interest in the exterior crust of life and in the dim untidy complex of interior living. In tune with modern trends she expresses herself fearlessly and candidly with increasing sense of involvement of human life. Nayantara Sahgal's chief contribution, thematically, has been her deep involvement and her concern with politics. She has the credit of developing the scope of political novels, and widening its area of contents and adding a new dimension to it. In her novels politics is not the concern only of the politician, but it is an all-pervasive influence, affecting all aspects of life. Her interest is not confined to a single political event or a historical fact or the life of a politician. Or even one predominant trend. Her interest goes beyond this to envelop the entire politics. The political range of Nayantara Sahgal has not been surprised by any other Indo Anglian novelist. She has endeavoured very consistently and comprehensively to analyse political happenings and trends, revealing all the provinces of political life and exploring all its depths. Through her concern with politics, she also projects a wider vision of the novel becomes a concern for the quality of life.

In this regard, Shyam M. Asnami remarks while discussing Nayantara Sahgal as a political novelist. "Mrs. Sahgal is nothing if not political and each one of her novels has a political substratum. If one speaks of politics as her "primordial predilection, the central core of her being, it would not be an exaggeration. Politics is all pervasive in all her books, as if by some divine fiat, peeping all through, through each chink, every crevice." p. 37.

Almost all the novels of Nayantara are political and her concern with humanistic values is also political. It can also be said that her concern with politics is a humanistic concern because in her works both are inter related and equated. Nayantara stands for the new humanism and new mortality, according to which a woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured partner. The novels of Nayantara present the reality of the contemporary political scene. They not only analyse the present trends in all their human details, but also foresee in which direction the political wind blows next. It can be asserted that it is her responsibility to the society that she chooses to discharge through the writing of politically conscious novels. Dr Manmohan Bhatnagar comments, "Nayantara 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" and in her "emotional and intellectual make up, to such an extent that she can no longer remain a mere passive spectator to the happenings with a far reaching fall out affecting vital human interests. The account of recent political events in her novels is imbued to the core with an acute consciousness of certain basis assumptions and values to which the novelist is committed and it is more by way of enshrining these fundamentals or bemoaning the absence thereof that she goes about setting her stories in a historical recognizable locale. The milieu invoked in all its diverse dimensions is neither mere window dressing nor the dull, drab and soulless account of a historian." p. 56-57.

The very first novel of Nayantara Sahgal entitled 'A Time To Be Happy' published in 1958, is a political novel. It deals with the political events of India. It is set in the immediate pre and post-Independence era. It is a story of the upper middle class people struggling for achieving and then tasting the pleasures of independence. Its scene is merely of Sharanpur, a commercial city of medium size. It gives glimpses of the stirring of forties and the early fifties. The society, which has been described, is undergoing radical changes. Although, by implication it is political novel, yet its fore ground is always occupied with individuals, their lives and the atmosphere in which they live. The great events in New Delhi also take place but they remain in the background. The chief characters of the novel are the narrator the member of the Shivpal and the Sahai families. The narrator, young and then the middle aged man is the only son of a rich and flourishing family. He becomes a staunch Gandhian and sweeps into the non-cooperation movements. He himself narrates his own story of plunging into the national movement.

"Gandhi's national movement was nearly as young as I was in those days, and it was natural that I, of recently awakened conscious, and it, of a new born, throbbing vitality, should have been drawn together each seeking the other's strength. For me it was the clarion call that drew me out of my adolescent confusions and threw open my future course, where as it in turn sought me out eagerly, for it was a growing thing and had need of many like me if it would expand to maturity. Its leader was just a name to me, for I had never seen him, but the words he spoke about village India, her desperate plight, her crushing burdens of debt, seemed to echo in the urban tragedy, I saw all around me. Though later I worked in the villages my first arousal was to the city's needs." p. 7

The novel creates a realistic picture of pre and post independence era. Sohan Bhai, a Gandhian freedom fighter recreates for us the calamitous famine in 1943 in Bangal. The Quit India Movement enters the novel indirectly through the happenings in the lives of two minor functionaries in the novel. The narration in its meandering course creates a society marked by segregation of communities, discriminations against Indians, servility among the rich and well set people. The message of Gandhi as presented in the novel cuts across simplistic sociological, political or spiritual formulations.

Equally note worthy is the sensing of the political climate in post independence India with an unscrupulous scramble for power. It also describes a covert strain of the rising trends of extremism, fundamentalism, obscurantism and populism. There are also ceaseless campaigns against the evils of drinking, meat eating and getting vaccinated against disease.

The characters can be divided in to two groups. The first group includes those who have been brought up in the old, traditionally, conservative mould. They are suspicious of all change, refusing to shift off; they remain unaffected, by the tumult of ideas all around them. All in the second group, there are those who find no escape from some kind of immediate adjustment with the new pattern of living, slowly evolving and replacing the old. The character of Sanad undergoes a sea change. He is acutely conscious of the political and social forces. He is drifted in to the spate of nationalism, learns Hindi and spinning, and is thinking of switching over to the "dhoti kurta" style of dress. All these activities of Sanad are noticed with grave concern by Mr. Trent, the manager of a British firm, wherein he is employed. Sanad's inner conflict and adolescent confusions are depicted with uncanny accuracy. When normal pressurizing tactics fail, he is invited to Calcutta for a face to face talk, where he boldly tells the authorities of the firm that nothing was wrong about his activities; and that the steps he had been taking were only to familiarize himself with his own country.

This novel gives a comprehensive description of the then society-particularly the upper society. It presents the Shivpals, the Sahais, their loves, opinions, acts and experiences and even other individuals around them. It also introduces us to some wonderfully understood British officials and their lives, as well as to a few hapless Indians trying to be more British than they really are. It is a political novel based on humanistic values. It raises some problems, which are discussed very seriously. Shyam Asnami gives a very appropriate appraisal of the themes and problems discussed in this novel, when he writes-

"The problem discussed is related to, and springs out of the slowly evolving socio-political situation in the country in those turbulent times; the theme of adjustment to a shifting political panorama in a country struggling to be free. Life is a series of adjustments-outer as well as within one's own self,- the later is rendered difficult, even frustrating and causing undue tension, when one order is in death-throes, and slowly and painfully - yielding place to a new, unknown reality introducing confusion and chaos, outer and inner." p. 40

It also describes the Indian attitude of life and mortality. Kusum grows up in the liberal atmosphere of the Sahai home, but there are others who are not so fortunate. Raghubir, a clerk in Sanad's office is guided by his Brahmin origins and a false sense of social prestige. He refuses the job of the salesman because it will seriously affect his chances of good matrimonial alliance. There are others who are its silent victims and willingly accept their fate, Bihari, the peon in the narrator's office, Prabha Mathur who accepts her husband's second marriage. The men-women relationships and attitudes towards marriage, divorce and other related issues are governed by traditional faith and traditional scriptures.

Nayantara Sahgal's novel "This Time of Morning" is set in post-Independence India. It does not have a pin pointed theme and definite plot. It is like a fragment from a certain section of Indian life, in the post-Independence period, dealing with no particular problem in fullness or any relationship in detail. The life which is described is the life shot through with politics, all over politics and sex, an eating, drinking, merry-making, kissing, hugging, dancing and copulating world, with conferences, committees, public meetings, get-together, discussions, seminars, processions, demonstrations, protests, boycotts interspersed with parties and club activities.

In this novel, the post-Independent generation has come into being, a generation to whom freedom is no longer a dream but a reality and this generation lives side by side with an older generation which has struggled to turn it into reality. There are also people who like Kalyan Sinha have rejected both the nationalist and the British worlds not passively but consciously and critically. There are also those who like Somnath and Harimohan adhered to the Gandhian values in name not in spirit. This process of juxtaposing different kinds of people continues in her later novels where there are many worlds reflecting the confusion and the muddle of the contemporary political situation but the question persistently remain the same—one of the validity of non violence versus violence. It becomes a question of material priorities versus human values. Nayantara Sahgal raises such thought provoking questions through her fiction.

Kailash has his firm faith in the quality of the people who are involved in the task of nation building. Social change can be meaningful only when the human being is not bypassed and remains the ultimate concern. Factories and economic complains are not an end in themselves. For Gandhi and his followers, revolution was neither a class war nor a religious crusade. It was not a road to personal ambition Kailash echoes his belief when he says that any game was a dirty game when dirty people played it. With more and more unscrupulous people flocking to the politics, Kailash is ousted both from U.N. delegation and the U.P. ministry. His return to politics is not a reward for virtue, but the continuation of the struggle. He is expected to lead another crusade for justice and equality and all crusades demand dedication and sacrifice. This novel the 'Time of Morning' mirrors the political condition of India after independence. This novel can be called a semi historical one. Nayantara, herself, is a keen observer of the high drama of New Delhi's fashionable and elite society. She portrays in detail, the persons and events in the morrow of freedom with remarkable authenticity, one can almost identify the characters with the living ones. But the world in which these characters live is incensed with imagination, romance, and love and flirting.

"Rich Like Us", is a very famous novel by Nayantara Sahgal. It is apparently about the emergency, about the political events of the mid-seventies, the authoritarian pattern which was followed, and the isolation it imposed. It also describes the causes, which led to the emergency. The political theme is presented mainly through the consciousness of Somali Ranade, a middle-aged single women, who is an I.A.S. officer in the Ministry of Industries. During the emergency of 1975, she refuses to sanction, preposterous foreign collaboration project, which has the support of the power. As a result, she is punished with demotion. She falls ill. After the recovery, she watches helplessly, with other like minded people, the spectacle of how absolute power corrupts absolutely at all the levels. Various facets of life in the periods are shown, all norms are flouted, individual rights curtailed in the name of political stability. It is done with the willing assistance of generally spineless bureaucracy interested only in self-seeking. The innocent are jailed for having committed non-existent crimes. People are deprived of their fundamental rights.

Nayantara is primarily a political novelist. She very boldly describes the political conditions of India through her novels. Her description is very realistic. She relentlessly exposes the rampant corruption, nepotism, demoralization of politicians and bureaucrats. She exposes the atrocities perpetrated by the landlords on the poor, the way how the landlords robbed the poor and the starving farmers, murders committed to safeguard the vested interests of the politicians and the Cabinet Ministers. In all her novels, Nayantara Sahgal uses political chronicling for a perceptive analysis of the political process. The steadily growing unscrupulousness, the accumulating problems and the diminishing will to take hard decisions, the long-term vision succumbing to short-sighted populism all those could not but undermine the democratic superstructure.

Nayantara Sahgal deals with many important and conspicuous themes. But politics and nobility are the two major themes around which the plots of her novels revolve. Politics is in the blood of Nayantara Sahgal and she can not help depicting the political scenario of India. Most of her novels are based on Indian struggle for Independence. She depicts the Gandhian era with patriotic fervour. She also describes corruption, nepotism and other vices in Indian politics, bureaucracy and nobility with an objective outlook. The Gandhian philosophy and ideology cover a vast canvas of her fiction.

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