

THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *MISTAKEN IDENTITY*

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal is a keen observer of the Indian politic scene. As a reputed novelist and noted, political writer, Sahgal has often combined fiction with journalism. Beginning with Time to be Happy (1958) to her latest Mistaken Identity (1988) all her novels have a dominant political streak. This is an attempt to focus on and explore the strong political statement of Mistaken Identity and how it mirrors the milieu, men and events of the momentous period of the Indian history. The political angle in the novels of Indian fiction writers is not an unusual event. Mulk Raj Anand's novels, Raja Rao's Kanthapura, Narayan's Waiting for Mahatma, Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan, Kamala Markandaya's Sound and Fury and Cham an Nahal's Azadi have political undertones Sahgal is altogether different from these novelists in the sense that all her novels have a strong political dosage. Apart from Time to be Happy, Plans for Departure and Mistaken Identity her other five novels are based on rather recent politic developments. This Time of Morning revolves around the time when India had achieved her independence and politics had begun to reveal its ugly face. New Delhi as the nerve-centre of political power looms large in the narrative. In Storm in Chan digarh Sahgal projects Punjab as the Linguistic bifurcated state and value of non-

violence is put to the acid test there. In The Day of Shadow, Sahgal probes deeper into the political milieu as a new culture .of wheeling-dealing in politics begins to lake shape in the political jungle of New Delhi. A Situation in New Delhi, first serialized in a London magazine, deals with the uncertainty prevailing in the political power structure in the late 1950s early 60s. The novel written during the infamous emergency makes a powerful political statement. Rich Like Us takes close look at die emergency and highlights the callousness and cruelty of the system. In Plans for Departure, Sahgal breaks new ground. She takes a long-range shot of the pre-First World War scene. The novel takes place in 1914 and the locale is India but "its inner moral churning are all rooted in pre-war 1914 Europe."

Key words: politics, journalism, linguistic bifurcation and disobedience.

In *Mistaken Identity*, Sahgal frames her narrative against a turbulent period of Indian history. The novel paints the currents and cross-currents engulfing the country and other parts of the World in the first three decades of this century. The narrator of the novel is Bhushan Singh (Jumbo to Sylla) the love-loom son of Raja of Vijaygarh. After a long sojourn abroad following his tempestuous affair with a Muslim girl Razia and subsequent Bhushan is on his way back home when a cruel case of mistaken identity grips him and lands him in the jail. The narrative shuttles back and forth in time space as the colorful past of Bhushan hangs tantalizingly in air and the political Events of the day appear as a running commentary. As the case of treason against Bhushan drags on in the court, Sahgal has time to look on his cell-mates and the world around them. Razia, Sylla, Willie-May flit in and out

of his colorful past as the Indian freedom movement is painted with gentle brush. Sahgal Jakes a panoramic view of the global events though the spotlight centers on India and her landmark movements. As the high court sets him free in 1932, Bhushan finds a new meaning in emerging relationships.

The Mistaken Identity is a significant milestone in Sahgal's long Career as a novelist. The novel is a graphic document of the twilight years of the Raj in India and may well serve as a reference point to many events and actions of the freedom movement. As Vijayalakshmi Pandit's daughter (though she would, like to be known as her father's daughter) and Nehni's niece,

Sahgal had watched history in slow motion. The novel provides a glimpse into Sahgal's hawk eye for details and sound grasp the world history. Bhaiji, the Khaddar worker and a product the then Congress culture is shadowed by two hangers-on who might as well have been nameless. She finds something wrong with the communists who are forever divining and devising, escape routes based on fantastic, theses. Their optimism is absolutely unrelated to the world around them. Sahgal is ruthless in her view of politicians and the games and double-speak they indulge in. She spares none, not even Gandhi. By Unity they mean trumped-up unities. Public emotions gush on like taps, then each to his lair until it's time to tear each other to pieces again. Viewed against the current communal; situation in the country, the assumption referred to above is not unfounded.

The Mistaken Identity is dotted with significant signposts of the, Indian freedom movement. The Lahore conspiracy case is splashed in the novel much in the fashion of a tabloid headlines: "case is closed with three hangings, Bhagat Singh and his two close colleagues were executed in Lahore jail yesterday/ March, 23 and surreptitiously cremated

on the banks of the Sutlej river Gandhi is out of jail but he could not get the execution stayed." Earlier, the news about the Lahore prisoners filters through Bhaiji's lawyer.' 'Since August they have been locked in their cells, no fresh air, no outing." Gandhi's, salt , march to the sea at Dandi is vividly described in the journalistic style. "A civil disobedience campaign is in full swing, Our newspaper says immense crowds cheered him on and thousands joined the march. People are manufacturing salt in pans all over the country. " The salt march had unnerved the government which "passed thirteen ordinances more than any other If since the Mutiny our Jawing practically every pity peasant groups, youth leagues, Khaddar workers, les, nationalists and communists." Dr. Sarvepalli portrayed in his biography on Jawaharlal Nehru describes the salt in the same breath. It was "a high place, as fact and as in the history of the Indian freedom movement and fed, of freedom in the world" *Sahgal, without mentioning* lije, chips in the news of Chandra Shekhar Azad's death at freed Park in Allahabad." *This is where a revolutionary was just* last year in February." *The Khilafat movement is fight* alive through Bhushan's Sylla connection, 'It is a big Hindu-Muslim cause. "

In *Mistaken Identity*, Sahgal takes a world view of the developments taking place in the first three decades of this century deftly using Bhushan's sex life with Willie-May, Sahgal Sees us back to the Roaring Twenties. The American political Jlcne comes alive through Willie Tay's father *Goldberger who* ponders, What we are doing in these United States with a *president* [Wilson] who is off making peace in Europe when his own front yard is on fire. The Bolsheviks are coming, does he care? This country could go socialist in the middle of Wilson's ext speech. "

Sahgal's penetrating eyes focus on Turkey through phushan's encounter with the Sheikh during his stay at the Taj in Bombay. "they had got rid of the Caliph, they had dissolved the religious orders, they had replaced the Sharia with a western civil code. Now they had a new they constitution and European in place of Arab numerals." Sahgal looks at Russia through Yusuf and his comrades he who fawn on everything connected with Russia. She compares Bolsheviks to "this scourge like a misfired orgasm that continually seems to be coming and never pomes." Sahgal's antipathy to communism surfaces frequently in the novel. At one point her protagonist lambasts communists by saying, they were communists the way health peaks are nature lovers and nudists. In *Mistaken Identity* politics is at the centre stage. The unfortunate case of mistaken identity there takes place because?" Nauzer says "These are unusual times. The Government feg beleaguered and threatened." Sahgal portrays graphic tumult and trauma of the times when according to S. Gopal, Whole World was one question marie, evoiy country and every poeple were in the melting pot. It appeared to be a dissolve| period of history when the world was in labour." Sahgal pensively chronicles the political milieu of the period. Her politic background and parentage make her task easier. In a "Meet tfj' Author" programme arranged by the India International Sen and Sahitya Akademi, Sahgal pointed out that she had emerge unscathed from the political background of the Nehru firms though she admitted that in our society to separate politics and personal lives is almost impossible. The first part of her point is debatable though her second point has a ring of truth about it. *Mistaken Identity* is a slice of history which captures dramatic political events and dramatic changes in the contours and character of the country at a crucial juncture. J.K. Galbraith; eminent economist and writer, observes about his latest novel, *Tenured Professor*, in *The Listener*, "Whenever he wanted to escape into truth he has written

a novel. You can always get close to reality." *In Mistaken Identity*, Sahgal certainly gets closer to the political reality of pre-Independence India.

Works Cited:

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