

Narrative Devices in Nayantara Sahgal's Fiction

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Abstract: Is it possible to write in English and not lose your Indian identity? This question is very interesting in establishing a national literature. There must be many readers in Delhi or Chandigarh who enjoy trying, to match Nayantara Sahgal's character with real people. Such readers can also agree or disagree with her interpretation of political events. All of us know her her family background which has given her opportunity to learn about politics from a very personal perspective, we tend to assume she knows what she is talking about. Nayantara Sahgal is a novelist of politics as well as a successful political columnist for different newspapers. The novels of Nayantara Sahgal deal with a wide range of themes ranging from personal dilemma and problems, joys and sorrows, fulfillment and frustrations of women protagonists to the political upheavals that India has experienced since Independence. Her novels read like commentaries on the political and social turmoil that India has been facing since independence. Her writing is generally marked by simplicity and boldness. It is also renowned for keeping in touch with the latest political ups and downs with a touch of Western liberalism. She describes in her novels how woman is exploited even during the modern times by both the individuals and the society. Her novels are chiefly remarkable for the fictional art of Nayantara Sahgal. This article focuses on the narrative techniques of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal which is an important aspect of her fictional presentation.

Keywords: Political liberalism, Techniques, Resemblance, Nation, Recurring, Narrative.

Introduction:

Born in 1927 in Allahabad, Nayantara is the second daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and the child of a rich heritage. Her parents and relatives actively participated in the freedom movement. Politics entered the life of Nayantara very early and she learnt to accept many unusual happenings as matters of normal occurrence. Her childhood was spent in Anand Bhawan at Allahabad with her parents, her maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru and her cousin, Indira Gandhi. Her childhood and adolescence were spent amidst India's political reverberations, the crusade for emancipation from the British yoke and the influence of Gandhian ideas of freedom and non-violence. The Gandhian values have formed the basis of Sahgal's approach to problems both political and personal. She has, as A. V. Krishna Rao states, "inherited and cherished a certain set of values and attitudes toward life which can be best described as a complex of political liberalism, social sophistication, economic moderation and cultural catholicity in continual interaction with the Gandhian idealism." (Krishna Rao, 1996, p.4)

Sahgal's novels concern themselves with the dialect of the high life in cosmopolitan cities. It is a life marked by a greater degree of sophistication. Shyam M. Asnani remarks about the "selective world of upper class people of power and position in her novels". (Shyam M Asnani, 1980) The dynamic life-styles of those circles and their changing traditions provide her with the

material. Her fictional world is occupied by political leaders, business tycoons, foreign advisers, upper class people, highly qualified persons like ambassadors, ministers, vice-chancellors, professors, writers and journalists. She considers her novels to be political in content and she says "each of the novels more or less reflect the political era we were passing through". (Jasbir Jain, 1976, Nov.19, p.143)

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the distinguished Indo-English writers who write in the stream of national consciousness. The first generation of important women writers like R. P. Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande who heralded new consciousness, particularly the pathetic plight of the Indian women, began creating and publishing their work in the 1950s. During this period, Nayantara Sahgal emerged as one of the most significant voices in the realm of Indian English fiction. She is a prolific writer. She has to her credit nine novels, two biographies, two political commentaries and a large number of articles, contributions to various newspapers and magazines. She has been active on the literary scene both as a creative writer and a political columnist.

Sahgal's novels seem to follow a **loose chronological sequence**. *This Time of Morning* is set against the time of Independence. *Storm in Chandigarh* reflects the problems of partition and ends with politicians concerned not over the

creation or survival of the nation, but rather with prohibition. In *The Day in Shadow* the country has moved into oil exploration and is about to change its established position of non-alignment to an alliance favouring the Soviet Union. The novel ends with the suggestion that a leftist revolution is coming, an idea which is picked up at the beginning of *A Situation In New Delhi*. By now the old leader is dead, those who make revolution by words seem to be in power and young group of terrorists are at work. The students movement to counteract these forces has begun. There are many issues unresolved.

Sahgal's recurring themes device:

An analysis of the novels shows Sahgal's recurring themes. *This Time of Morning* begins with Rakesh coming back to Delhi after serving abroad in the foreign service. Although he is already acquainted with the major figures on the political scene, he is something of an outsider after six year's absence, and the reader comes to understand the complexities of political life as Rakesh himself does. Kalyan, the firm determined, self-serving member of the U.N. delegation, has acquired a position of power and looks for more. Rashmi has returned to her parent's home to decide whether to divorce her husband. By the end of the novel, Kalyan's political career has had a set-back due to his over-bearing self-confidence and lack of understanding of the democratic nature of government. Meenakshi Mukherjee has opined of *A Time To Be Happy*, "the point of view shifts uneasily between an impersonal observer, a narrator agent, and an omniscient author, and the result is not a successful novel but merely an interesting social document." (Meenakshi Mukherjee, 1971, p.38) This comment is equally applicable to *This Time of Morning*. In the first chapter alone the narrative moves from Rakesh to Rashmi to Kailash, back to Rashmi and to Arjun. This might have worked as an introductory technique. The ability to create convincing characters efficiently is Sahgal's speciality. She paints a broader picture, rich with many interesting figures to delight us, but they do not combine to form a powerful whole.

It is an over-simplification to say that Rakesh and Rashmi are carried over into *Storm in Chandigarh* with new names, but certainly there are strong resemblances between them and Vishal and Saroj. Both men are intellectual and sensitive, political and social observers. Vishal too is an outsider, having been sent to Chandigarh as Delhi's liaison officer to negotiate between the chief ministers of Punjab and Hariyana. Saroj is only vaguely aware of her dissatisfaction with her husband Inder.

Although the two chief characters occupy a more central place in the total narrative of *Storm*

In *Chandigarh*, Sahgal has again created many memorable secondary figures such as Gyan Singh. Like Kalyan, Gyan Singh is born poor whose strong sense of self, his disregard for finger points of morality and his energy and drive have made him a powerful man. One of the central ideas in the novel from the beginning is the question of whether a tradition of reflection and moderation can provide adequate leadership in a time which seems to call for energetic and decisive leaders. In Gyan Singh and Kalyan we notice the attractions as well as the dangers of such people. Each of these colorful and dynamic persons is paired off against a character who represents quieter intelligence and sensitivity. It is interesting that although aggressive businessman like Inder receives little sympathy in the end, neither of the political figures is completely discredited.

In her marriage, Saroj is one of the thinkers, who endures and is acted upon, unlike her husband, who acts. The novelist has given us another apparently mis-matched couple to consider. Jit and Mara is a childless couple who suffer from emotional void in their life. Her marriage with sweet-tempered and considerate Jit has its share of estrangements and misgivings, but Mara's problem is not physical but psychological. The search for communication makes Mara come towards Inder. In her relationship with Inder, Mara stimulates his mind and involves him in ways no woman ever has. Mara is capable of responding to Inder's needs which highlights her inability to respond to Jit's much simpler needs. Mara's lack of interest makes Jit feel that all his affection and care are wasted. Jit is like Saroj in his passive acceptance, even of Mara's affair with Inder. Saroj learns that mere tolerance is not a good feature. She has to reach out to create with Vishal the relationship which Inder has refused. But for Jit, it is patience and enduring love which restore his marriage. The novels *This Time of Morning* and *Storm in Chandigarh* have remarkable similarities in characters and themes. There is more depth in characterization, however, and the social and political background is more integrated into the story. There are people much given to intellectualising, particularly attempting rather self-consciously to define what it means to be Indian, or Hindu or Brahmin.

The Day in Shadow deals with the struggle of a young, beautiful and daring Indian woman trapped under the burden of a brutal divorce settlement and the agony and unhappiness she experiences in the hands of cruel and unjust male-dominated society of India. In this novel however, she has created a powerful central image in the divorce settlement which Som has desired for his wife Simrit. He has given her six lakhs worth of shares in trust for their son. While she can not use them, she must pay the tax on them. So that anything she earns through her writing will be wiped out. She herself accepted the terms but so

have the law courts. The point is clearly made that heartless individuals and societies both must learn compassion and justice.

Sumer Singh endangers India's independence as Som did Simrit's when he allows leftist powers to gain control through exploitation of oil reserves. Although she comes from a wealthy family, Sumer Singh is very like Kalyan and Gyan Singh in manipulating people and events to achieve his own ends.

Stream of Consciousness Technique:

The Western wave of **stream of consciousness technique** affected the writings of the novelist and she also plunged deep into the inner world of her characters. She shows that though Indians have got freedom yet it is only on the surface level as in their attitudes to love, morality, sex, marriage, education and religion, they are still the slaves of the West. The novelist is richly inspired by the political movement of the society. Though the main theme of her novels is politics, yet the problem of divorce and disintegration of the marriage in a typical Indian setting is also beautifully dealt with.

A Situation In New Delhi follows the **stream of consciousness technique** pattern. Sahgal tells the story as a **multi focussed narrative** and we recognize familiar character types: we see through Michael, the English writer of biographies who returns to Delhi after ten years to write the life of Shivraj, the beloved national leader who has recently died. We then turn to Devi, Shivraj's sister, now Education Minister. Next Usman, Vice-chancellor of the university, an old friend of Devi and a man dedicated to the values of thoughtful moderation who Shivraj embodied. The background problems in this novel are education and the revolutionary forces which have gained ground following Shivraj's death.

Although the novelist's multiple narrative technique is unchanged, there are clearly some new elements here. The society that Nayantara creates in *A Situation in New Delhi* is one which fails to protect women even on the University campus in the capital city of the country as here Madhu, a student of Delhi University, is raped in the Register's office. The boys who raped Madhu obviously regard Madhu only as an object of lust to be used at their disposal and have no regard for her feelings, will and self-respect. A society which produces such men and cannot punish them does not deserve to have women in it.

Sahgal's each of the novel revolves around a couple -Rakesh and Rashmi, Vishal and Saroj, Raj and Simrit. As politicians or government servants, the men are strikingly similar-intelligent, articulate, compassionate, committed to presuming the values of justice and moderation. While it is in

each case the man who is the dominant character, it is interesting that women are increasingly more fully characterized. Rashmi is the least developed whereas Simrit, as wife, mother, writer, lover, is the most complex. Simrit and Raj had never discussed marriage. He encourages her to be assertive and independent, yet in the final paper he over-rides her not very convincing protestations that she needs more time, to declare emphatically that they will be married as soon as possible. Clearly this novel is different from the earlier ones. It is considerably shorter and more concentrated in its effect. It deals with violence to a greater effort than any other and it includes a description of sex which is a new element in Sahgal's writing. There are intellectual concepts here which can be traced through all her work; a faith in rationality and moderation in political as well as personal levels-, an awareness that these are endangered values which must be fought for.

Interior Monologue Method

The Method of Interior Monologue is used more freely and successfully in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. The reader is taken into confidence regarding the thoughts and reactions of the various characters and their inner conflicts. In *Storm in Chandigarh* we not only come to know about Harpal's background but also about his reactions to various situations, his unhappiness about certain developments and his feeling of inadequacy and frustration. The reactions of one character are juxtaposed against another's and this again is both a method of narration and characterization.

On the surface there is a continuation of the same method in *The Day in Shadow* but there is a clear cut difference in the use of these techniques. Simrit does not reveal anything to Raj about her relationship with Som but it becomes possible to understand it through Som's relationship with Lalli and his British employer. Som's relationship with his children is made clear through his indifference to them. They simply do not count as individuals or as human beings. Only his son Brij counts for he satisfies his male ego and his pride of possession. Som does not communicate with him but simply exercises his power by hanging a hope in front of him.

Juxtaposition and symbolism:

Juxtaposition and symbolism mark the narrative method in *A Situation in New Delhi* and *Rich Like Us*. The central unified force is, of course Shivraj but there is also a constant juxtaposition, between the past and the present, and between tradition and revolution each projecting value system of its own. Politically there are so many different stands : there is Shivraj's idealism and faith in human beings, the cabinet's pseudo-

radicalism, Devi's helpless inactivity and Rishad's violent movement. At another level there is Pinky who has no views or values and lives life in a superficial manner. The story moves forward through a series of confrontations : there is one between the vice-chancellor and the student, there is one between Devi and her colleagues where the crisis is never reached. These clashes had the various characters to understand their own selves better. They come to an end in Rishad's death and Madhu's suicide.

In the novel *Rich Like Us* the novelist makes use of some editorials and letters written to the editors of the newspapers as a form of Historical evidence. One of them is an editorial of the *Calcutta gazette* of the 7th Dec'1829 which expresses supreme pleasure and celebrates the Act of Abolition of the cruel right of suttee passed by Lord William Bentinck. The English administrator is applauded for his reform which has ended "a system demoralizing in its effect on the living, a revolting system of suicide and murder." (*Rich Like Us* p. 134), Sonali discovers yet another instance of suttee which dates back to 29th Dec'1929 as recorded in the *Bombay Courier*. By quoting these documents the novelist juxtaposes the dead past with the living present bringing both into sharp focus of contrast.

The use of symbols:

In Sahgal's earlier novels the use of symbols is limited but as her irony moves away, the use of symbols increases. In *A Time To Be Happy* it is the club which is a symbol of the coming together of the Indian and the British worlds. In *This Time of Morning* Rashmi buys an image of Ganesh to announce her interest in life. Similarly in *Storm in Chandigarh* the threat to the finer things of life is symbolised by the destruction of the painting in Inder's Office. In *The Day in Shadow* it is not without propose that Som and Vetter are engaged in the production of armament and that Sumer Singh's office in Parliament House has a window without a view. In *A Situation in New Delhi* Shivraj himself is a symbol of human values. In *Rich Like Us* Sonali

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Ranade is the symbol of human values and honesty, who refuses to sanction a preposterous foreign collaboration project which has the support of people in power. As a result of this she is punished with demotion, falls ill and after recovery watches the things going on helplessly.

Irony and humour:

Irony and humour are used effectively in the description of the cabinet members. The gap between the professions and the practice of the ministers and their lack of ideas are targets of ironic satire while some of their actions are humorous. Ram Murti is also very humorous. He does not accept her invitation for a cup of coffee, he doesn't even look at her- he looks at the coffee pot. So is the case with Devi's driver, Ajaib Singh. He is the other extreme. He has no inhibitions and is outspoken to the point of being rude at times. He shows his respect not by silence but by addressing her as 'Sir', thus giving to her a status outside the ordinary duties of a woman. The application he writes to her requesting her help for his son's admission is both practical and humorous - practical in approach and humorous in language.

Summing Up:

On the whole Nayantara Sahgal gives much importance to the framework of the structure of the novels. Through out her work there is continuity. She takes up each individual section of her design, filling it out, relating it to the others, continually interweaving past and present until the pattern is complete. The novels are unified, first, by their background of recent Indian politics. To whatever extent this is historically accurate, the theme of political struggle is clearly one of her most important concerns. Secondly, we are aware of her division of the world into the aggressors and the non-aggressors, the active and the thoughtful, those whose main interest is riches and power and those who care for justice and moderation. Finally, growing out of both of these concerns, is her awareness of the need for women to become equal partners in the struggle to protect those values which allow human beings to live together in mutual respect.