



Political and Personal Discord in Nayantara Sahgal's Storm in Chandigarh

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OPEN ACCESS

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VOLUME 05
ISSUE 01
YEAR 2022

RECEIVED 12 November 2021
ACCEPTED 15 December 2021
PUBLISHED 05 January 2022

CITATION

Savita Punia. (2022). Political and Personal Discord in Nayantara Sahgal's Storm in Chandigarh. *The Scholars Time: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*. 05 (01). pp-01-08



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ABSTRACT

Nayantara Sahgal shows a profound confidence in individual opportunity, and the single topic that goes through the entirety of her books is man's familiarity with the ramifications of opportunity. In each novel, she manages the subject of freedom of the individual and expounds it against the background of country's battle to accomplish autonomy. The metaphorical expression of "Storm" in this novel works at several levels; mainly the political one, following the division of Punjab into two states and the secondly, the personal or emotional crisis in the marital conflicts that how a husband can cause violence to his wife or vice versa. The two backgrounds i.e., political, and personal run parallel to each other and are well integrated in the theme of her fictional framework.

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INTRODUCTION

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the recognized Indian English writers who has written novels in the stream of national consciousness. She remained active on the Indian scene both as an innovative and creative writer and as a political activist for more than three and a half decades. Most of her novels are political in content and intention that she herself declares, "Each of the novels more or less reflects the political era we are passing through"¹

In almost every novel Sahgal is preoccupied with individual's quest for freedom and self – introspection. Her fictional work is a thoroughly integrated system of values focused on the concept of freedom as a fundamental significance to the peace and progress of the human spirit. Her early association with India's freedom struggle deeply affected her life and her writings as well. The idea of non-violence as a political technique and the idea of religious approach to politics was what influenced her preoccupation with the theme of freedom.

Nayantara Sahgal has full faith in the doctrine of peaceful existence and freedom of individuals at all levels. Her idea of liberty incorporates the complete articulation of one's thoughts and perception as well as the quest of one's identity. Sahgal's characters have solid confidence in individual's capacity to communicate and reach others through arguments and discussion. Liberty of individual and freedom of India emerged as twin major subjects in her fictional world.

In her third fictional work, *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), she has dealt with the issue of political conflicts and violence emerging from its being; Chandigarh, the common capital of the two states i.e., Punjab and Haryana, yet the novel reflects Nayantara Sahgal's faith in human spirit in a traditional and cultural milieu and its characteristic reactions to confront the issues of social and political transformation. Thus, the novel shows how the political change in Punjab in the post-independence era affected the characters socially, emotionally, and politically.

The metaphorical expression of "Storm" in the novel works at two levels; firstly, the political one, resulting from the division of Punjab into two states and secondly, the personal one resulting from the emotional crisis in the marital conflicts that how a husband can cause violence to his better half or vice versa. Both the crisis i.e., the political and the personal run parallel to each other in the same background and are well connected to the theme of her fictional framework. *Storm in Chandigarh* is also a reflection of certain similarities and dissimilarities among various characters. Of the five major characters, Vishal Dubey the I.C.S. officer who was assigned the task as a liaison between the centre and the two State Governments is caught in the "storm" at both levels. This tangled discord of the political and emotional crisis is a sure sign of Sahgal's creative competence."²

On the political front the rift arises between two new Chief ministers; Gyan Singh of Punjab and Harpal Singh of Haryana over State boundaries of both states, electronic power, and water issues. The vicious Chief Minister of Punjab threatens to lead a strike at Habra which results in a serious situation of emergency in Chandigarh. Thus "The storm in Chandigarh can be attributed, at one level to the estrangement between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh."

The conflict between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is a clash of ideologies i.e. a conflict between the cults of violence versus the idea of non-violence. Whenever there is a clash between the two CMs Dubey realizes that this was more than a political clash. "It was a battle of philosophies."

Gyan Singh is a man concerned only with the ends but not with means. He was an orphan brought up by a motor mechanic Uncle Dhan Singh. Later it was John Meadows, an American Missionary, who had helped in educating Gyan Singh and made efforts to instill a sense of conscience in him. Gyan had learnt to value only honour. He thinks: "Honour like prestige was public. It was a badge, the insignia of hardihood; the sign of a man's standing in his community." (p.119)

It is interesting to read Gyan Singh's success in life how from an illiterate truck driver, he successfully arose to the role of a political campaign manager for Harpal Singh, who was once the industry minister of old Punjab State. Gyan Singh's ambition, his disregard for morality and his energy have further taken him to the powerful post of CM.

Both the Chief Ministers Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh are juxtaposed in their manners and actions. "The partition of 1947 has left a deep scar on Harpal Singh's sensitive mind, apart from the personal loss of his parents and all their savings... The experience of 1947 has made Harpal more humane more determined to ameliorate the lot of the suffering."⁷ Dubey feels himself captured in a political confrontation in Chandigarh, when Gyan exploits the situation for his own political ends. A call for a general strike is a warning to the peace and harmony of life. Dubey says:

"What Gyan plans is a demonstration to show the strength of his demands. He'll call it off once he makes his point. It's a political trick, not a mass movement." (P.169 text)

"The political storm gathers momentum with incidents like the stone throwing in Inder's factory and finally breaks out with the strike by the electricity men."⁸ However, Vishal Dubey with his shrewd administrative skill restored law and order in Chandigarh.

Dubey finds how the situation of strike paralyzed the state of affairs in Chandigarh. The decline had deteriorated the quality of life and influenced personal and private values. Dubey advised Haryana Chief Minister not to submit possibly to Gyan's threat. "It's a risk," Dubey said "but there are greater risks; the prospect of the machinery of two states running down at the behest of one man without any kind of stand made against him.... Let us take the risk." (p.208 text)

Dubey realizes that it was the sole way to restore peace and harmony in normalcy of life. When news comes of the aged Union Home Minister's sudden death, Gyan Singh calls off the strike as a mark of respect to the Statesman.

On the personal level, the novel is a labyrinth of complicated relationships. Here again the protagonist Dubey is at the centre of the Scene of action. He plays an important role in his relationships with various characters. The personal world is sharply focused on the emotional crisis, in the marriages of various characters. The marital discord rises mainly from the gap of communication, subsequently resulting in the alienation of the couples. It is again Vishal who is sensitive to the problems caused in the personal world around him. Vishal believes that healthy human relations cannot be built by luck or by chance. They can be built "With care, with love, when possible, and otherwise with time and interest. And always with truth, or as much of it as the other person will allow." (p.91)

The background of Chandigarh is the emblematic portrayal of violent activities for social and political events. The political discord between the two newly emerged States is further reflected in the personal disharmony, of Inder and Saroj. The cult of violence raised in their marital relationship is due to Inder's male dominance on the domestic front. Vishal Dubey's marriage is likewise a "vanishing search for communication," Vishal who needs to fabricate a relationship on truth tracks down it a troublesome undertaking. In his relationship with

Leela he felt a lot of misery. Notwithstanding her extra-conjugal relationship with Hari, she claimed | on keeping the veneer of a stable marriage with Dubey. She had always lived a life a life of pretence and hypocrisy. Dubey realizes the torture of living together intimately yet remained strangers to each other. Vishal wonders: "Why between men and women, did passion so quickly find acceptance, while affection and friendship were so little cultivated." (p.21)

Sahgal's fictional creations sometimes strike auto biographical. Especially, Saroj in the novel seems to reflect the author's image. Sahgal herself acknowledges this when she says that there were "Pieces of me going into the men and women I created when I really began to write."⁹

Saroj who has been raised in the open atmospheres of opportunity anticipates equality within marriage. She is enormously shocked by her better half's violent reactions to her pre-marital affair she had during her college days. Inder is obsessed and could not forget this act of Saroj and continuously harasses her sense of innocence. The gap gradually becomes wider in Saroj-Inder relationship. Inder is aggressive in nature and treats her merely as a "possession." The kind of companionship like taking a walk with her in the pleasant evening has always been a difficult thing for him and he considers it a meaningless expenditure of time. Even his brief affair with Mara comes to an end. Mara's self-affirmation and individuality appalls him. He feels that man's relationship with women will continuously be one of dominance: "a thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a master, the man who will own and command her- and that's the man she will respect." (p. 104)

Inder saw in Gyan Singh's paper the news about Dubey's friendship and lonely walks with Saroj. He had drawn Saroj's attention to this, but Saroj refuses to give up. In the end Inder hits Dubey for having sent his wife Saroj to Delhi without his knowledge. Dubey feels: "All he felt was kinship with Harpal, who lay in hospital for no reason he could understand, and with Saroj, another kind of victim." (p.243)

"When Dubey sends Saroj to Delhi, he finds himself socially in the wrong. The message, which the writer wishes to impress upon the reader, is the courage involved in taking a stand against injustice and tyranny. This is the meaning of non-violence and the lesson which the post-independence era is compelled to learn all over again."¹¹

Though the novel focuses mainly on the issues of political clashes and violence originating from its being; Chandigarh, the common capital of the two states--- Punjab and Haryana yet the theme of tradition versus modernity is quite perceptible in it. The characters act like moderns but simultaneously they do not detach themselves totally from their customs. This blend of tradition and modernity can be observed in their reactions to morality, education, eating- habits, man-woman relations, attitude to love and architecture. Chandigarh, being a new city has nothing to flaunt its customs. People who have come to live in it have brought their convictions, thoughts, traditions along them, which has further enriched the way of life of this city. It has likewise created a kind of confusion or cultural and social storm here.

Storm in Chandigarh also touches upon the theme of tradition and modernity in terms of ethics and morality. Ethics and morality, though interrelated and often confused, have been given distinct identities and meaning by the modern educated people like Trivedi and Vishal Dubey. For example. Dubey would not subscribe to what is commonly understood as morality."(p.80)

The subject of man-woman relationship is closely related to morality. Both modern and traditional views are blended in the novel so far as this subject is concerned. For instance,

the so-called modern men and women, sitting together in leisurely moments, may discuss each other's marital and even extramarital relations. It was not so in the by-gone days. As Inder remarks:

"There was a time when such things couldn't be spoken, or even thought, except with shame. There's no shame nowadays, no barriers. Everything is taken lightly. And women talk and behave like men." (p.102)

Despite all glorification and poetic descriptions, Dubey regards women

"as the subdued sex, creatures not yet emerged from the chrysalis, for whom the adventure of self-expression has not even begun. Despite all their pretensions to modernity, Indian woman, particularly in the countryside, is still a figure of humility, neck bent, eyes downcast, living flesh consigned to oblivion." (p.189 text)

Women are not a subject for discussion in social gatherings. They are wives, daughters, mothers and sisters, and they belong to their man by contract or by blood. They continue to be regarded as belonging to the sphere of sex and procreation. They are dependents, not individuals: In the matter of man-woman relations, double standards and false, deceptive manners seem to have broken the characters away from the traditional moral values. In spite of her wishing, Mara cannot but live two lives "Inder and Jit. Jit and Inder." Though she does not want to "stumble into love making," yet she cannot resist her weakness. Mara, Jit's wife, has relations with Inder; Inder's wife Saroj has with Vishal Dubey and

"One thing you could not crave, the thing that was a crime, was that they should inhabit the world as your equals, with the splendour and variety of human choice before them." (p.190)

This is proved by the rebuke Saroj gets when she reaches back home after having a walk in the jungle in Dubey's company. Inder gets irritated about her absence from home and snubs her. Saroj's utterance-"I like to talk to him...He's a good man. " Infuriates Inder and he blurts "I don't give a damn if he's Jesus Christ." (p.193)

So, saying he not only thrashes her with words but with blows also. So, all their modernity melts away when it comes to man-woman relations.

This so-called modernity has given birth to corruption even in matters of matrimony. Men and Women come close without any emotional attachment. A woman is interested in getting, as husband, a man who is well placed and with whose office some measure of authority is attached. Thus money, and not love, determines the suitability of marriage. Husbands and wives feel animated and livened up in the company, especially cocktail parties, but at home, in moments of seclusion, they hardly have anything to share, and behave towards each other like wet cats.

Modern man has not given up the traditional view of regarding woman as an object of possession. But modern women, like Mara, struggling for their freedom disregard it. When Inder says about his wife, "She belongs to me," Mara quips, "Belongs to you? So do your shoes" (p.138) which, of course, means that it is not "belonging" but understanding that a modern woman expects from her man.

Despite their frank and free attitude, modern women are still steeped in jealousy. When Gauri and Dubey talk about the people, he has been in touch within Chandigarh, and he speaks of Mara's intelligence and beauty, Gauri Says, "I am a little jealous." She feels

jealous on hearing of another woman. But this is something that neither tradition nor modernity can take out of any woman.

The cult of family planning is also of recent origin and has an air of modernity about it. Many women have voluntarily taken to it because they appreciate the economic viability and social usefulness of a small family. Men are also aware of this fact. Here men and women both deviate from the traditional beliefs. Thus, Gauri's husband, Nikhil, says, "Hundreds of women use the damned thing successfully. It's madness to have three children nowadays." (p.46)

Religion has all along been a domineering force in traditional Indian society. The belief in the Karma theory has taught Indians to resign to their fate. Whatever they do, and whatever happens to them is viewed as a result of their past. Karmas and the will of fate. This led to a strong hold of religion on all fields of human activity. Religion is supposed to provide the basis for love and understanding but it is not possible in the modern society where people are governed by their surface interpretation. In *Storm in Chandigarh* the two approaches are represented by two sets of people. On the one hand are Trivedi, Dubey and Harpal, while on the other are men like Inder and Gyan, Trivedi is disturbed by the ambiguity of Hinduism and tells Dubey, 'This lack of definition doesn't suit us at all.' He questions the role of the Brahmin as 'Priest, lawgiver, adviser to sovereigns, custodian of the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the race in the contemporary context. Obviously, something has gone wrong for the heritage instead of making some positive contribution it has become a hindrance to progress and growth. Modern Indians have confined to rituals and those who practice it know not what for they do so. As Trivedi says to Dubey,

"You and I and our Brahmin ilk are the custodians of something we haven't a notion about. "We worship not what we can but what we cannot understand." (p.77)

Such satirical feelings regarding religion mark a significant change in people's thinking. Result oriented thinking has led modern man to show disregard for religion and religious ceremonies because he doesn't want to be slow and tedious. Sahgal has caught Dubey's inner self in the following remarks:

"What use was this heritage to ordinary men? What did it create but quietude? Did it toughen fibre, give emotional satisfaction? Did it help the soldier to fight better, the businessman to do his job better? Did it hold any comfort for Trivedi in the (lovely) night? Was it the thing you could cry out to kneel to, and surrender your spirit to?" (p.78)

These questions in Dubey's mind project the modern man's disinterestedness in Religion. In the novel, violence spreads because it is tolerated. Nobody takes a stand against it. People are inert and indifferent and allow violence to 'mount and ebb like some tidal wave, waiting for it to engulf them. Passively waiting, as they waited for the rains, for the harvest, for the birth of unwanted children, for death. (p.6)

While Gyan Singh and others like him are ruthless enough to exploit this passivity. In the novel, we see The Hindus have a backward-looking tendency and are excessively dominated by the past. Dubey tells a colleague:

*I think our great-grandmother does have a formidable
Influence on what we do. In a number of ways she's still alive.
Sometimes I think it will need a tearing up by the roots to get
her out of the way." (p.66)*

In the same novel Mara finds the Hindu heritage suffocatingly limiting. It is a bundle of 'old, useless impossible ideas' going on and on.

The subject of tradition versus modernity in *Storm in Chandigarh* is also touched upon by Nayantara Sahgal through references to architecture. Architecture is, perhaps, the most modern thing about Chandigarh. The people, initially, failed to measure up to this architecture. As Ajit Sahni, Mara's husband, remarks, "The architects could not find the right breed of human beings to inhabit their perfect blueprints." (p.49)

The architecture of Chandigarh is dear to those who live in this city and regard themselves a class apart from the rest of the Indian Society. To those who have developed a fascination for traditional type of constructions this architecture seems strange and prosperous. Gauri subscribes to such a view. She is irritated about "that funny looking thing stuck on top of the legislature."¹⁷

She quotes Justice Ahmed's remarks to stress that the High Court building is "positive hell inside." She says to Dubey, "The fact is we aren't ready for Chandigarh. We should carry on with dak-bungalow style living till everyone is educated and has some taste." (p. 159)

"Progress is not important in itself; it is the end-product of progress which matters."

We Indians take pride in looking modern. Hansa Ram, the owner of a fashionable restaurant, explains to Dubey: -

*"People like a western atmosphere."*¹⁸

But instead of catching up good points of the west, we are taking in their weaknesses. The novel depicts a blend of modern and traditional values.

The storm is blown off on both planes, the political and the personal, at the end of the novel. For Sahgal the test of a value lies in the freedom and growth that indicated a sense of fulfillment for the individual. Jasbir Jain writes on Nayantara Sahgal: "Human Beings need emotions, and communication and love. Even Inder who is so set in his ways feels the need for the 'oxygen of understanding.'" (p.222)

The novelist's main concern seems to be the depiction of the social life of Indian people of post-independence days, and to achieve this end she has used Chandigarh as a symbol. The storms, turmoil's, conflicts and upheavals (political and social) taking place in the social life of Chandigarh represent the changes taking place in modern India as a whole. The characters in the novel are modern and traditional, in their thinking, both at the same time. On the whole we can say that Nayantara Sahgal has brilliantly dealt with the theme of individual's search for freedom and self- realization. Freedom of individual and freedom of India emerged as twin themes in her novel. Besides this the blend of tradition and modernity can be brilliantly observed in her attitude to morality, education, eating - habits, man-woman relationships, attitude to religion, love, language and architecture in the novel.

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