



## Assertion of Freedom: the Substratum in Nayantara Sahgal's Political Novel, *A Situation in New Delhi*—A Study

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to study how different characters strive and liberate themselves from the suffocating atmosphere of politics in Nayantara Sahgal's political novel, A Situation in New Delhi. Mrs. Sahgal is one of the prominent Indian women novelists in English in the post-Independent era. Political fiction is her prime forte, where the setting and milieu are true to the requirements of a true political novel. Her protagonists, mostly women from the elite strata, are shown as struggling to come to terms with the harsh realities in both public and personal domains. The characters are depicted as wriggling and trying to break loose from the smothering political and personal spheres. In the process, they assert their freedom and single out their existence as individuals. In the present novel, the lead character Devi and her associates, Usman Ali and Michael, are shown as struggling against the emergence of opportunistic politics and their assertion of freedom. In the end, they resign to their respective official positions and inch forwards to fulfill their responsibilities in the chosen fields. The novel also deals with the issue of violence and the novelist shows that self-destruction is inherent in violence. Rishad, son of Devi, is a representative of the younger generation, who opt for violence in the novel. Sahgal vetoes the path of violence as a means to achieve egalitarian society.*

**Key words:** *assertion, egalitarian, freedom, suffocation, violence.*

### INTRODUCTION

Nayantara Sahgal is undoubtedly one of the celebrated Indian women novelists in English today. She is remarkable for her frank and bold observations on tradition and the values which impinge the psyche of women. Her women protagonists stand as metaphors for unfettered freedom which is denied of them in the name of tradition and morality in the male centered society. They question the very dichotomy of selective application of standards between men and women. Her acute perceptiveness which she parades through her novels has elevated Indian fiction in general and Indian women wringing in English in particular to the newer heights, coupled with her conviction in our hoary past and the modern western ethos. Nayantara, the second daughter of



Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, and the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, has her viewpoint of politics, in the post-Independent era, sharpened with her direct, personal and first hand acquaintance. The upper middle class men and women like politicians, bureaucrats, businesspeople, administrators and other social elites, with their flaws of character, their usual flip-flop attitudes, come alive vividly in her deft delineation in her novels. Her feminist perception; influenced by the modern philosophy of gender equality, her firm belief in being human, her bold characterization, have stood her in an undisputed position of a writer of par excellence.

Mrs. Sahgal fits into the definition of what constitutes a great writer of purpose with her deep sense of responsibility. Politics is her 'primordial predilection'. In the words of Shyam M. Asnani, "Mrs. Sahgal is nothing if not political and each one of her novels has a political substratum" (1973: 37[1]). All her books are prevalent with political setting and milieu as if driven by some deistic decree. Sahgal's humanism is conspicuous in her strong and vehement condemnation of anything which envisages women as second rate citizens and subalterns or as mere toys of momentary pleasure offering objects. She is a staunch votary and a crusader for gender parity and freedom in every sphere of life. Her novels eloquently proclaim that women are the 'equal and honored' partners of men. Sahgal argues that a woman, can, by her own self, conform "physically and emotionally to the meaning of freedom".

### CRITICAL APPRAISAL

The novels of Sahgal have politics as major setting or milieu, interspersed with socio-personal aspects of the individuals. She suggests the Gandhian thought, Nehruvian principles and political liberalism as the panacea for the ills which crop up in the context of modern political arena. Owing to her personal background of being born into an aristocratic family with a 'democratic temper', Sahgal has 'inherited and cherished certain values and attitudes' towards political liberalism right from her childhood. As A. V. Krishna Rao puts it, "Against that background, Nayantara Sahgal has always endeavored to live up to the values of freedom and a broad approach to life" (1976:5[7]). Sahgal's political novel, *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977), has rebounding spirit of politics. It is a skilful rendering of a conflict of two ideologies-the Nehruvian politics of principles and the modern politics of rank opportunism. Gandhian principles of truth, non-violence, Nehru's cause of 'social justice' have become irrelevant in the new political ambit. The novel highlights the disintegration of value based politics. Ranjana Harish aptly calls it "a novel of political dislocation" (1993:185[6]). The conflict of ideologies brings in a vertical split within the same political party. Those politicians, who continue to believe in the principled politics, feel marginalized. They suffer from a sense of dislocation and frustration. Critics argue that the experiences of the major characters in the novel are drawn from the personal life of Mrs. Sahgal, making the novel semi-autobiographical. The character of Shivraj is an analogue for Pandit Nehru, the maternal uncle of Sahgal. The death of Shivraj, a charismatic and popular Prime Minister, is the initiative point in the novel. The corrupt and deceitful political maneuvers have become the order of the day.

At the very outset of the novel, the death of Shivraj was announced by a British newspaper, "Shivraj was dead". As a man of sturdy political convictions and standards, he 'had the gift putting things in perspective'. He was "a



leader--the leader—at least in inspiration, of so many beyond his own borders...., there isn't going to be another like him in a hundred years” (2008:2[8]). The aftermath of death of Shivraj affected a number of his ardent followers. The reaction of his followers to the changed political situation in New Delhi is the focal point of the novel. The important characters, who adhere to Shivraj's ideology and personality are: Devi, his younger sister; Usman Ali, an academic and friend of Shivraj; and Michael Calvert, an English biographer. The novel also deliberates on the emotional impact made by the Naxalite movement on the student community of Delhi. The students, disillusioned by the lopsided policies of the government, resort to indiscipline and violence. Sahgal examines the Naxalite movement in all its dimensions. She remains neutral and rises above any kind of prejudice. Responding to the criticism of her being anticommunist, Sahgal, in an interview with V. Mohini, says, “Depiction of self-destructive violence might have aroused the comment of being anticommunist” (1990:66[2]).

Devi, the protagonist of the novel, even after the death of Shivraj, subjects herself to the influence of his personality. Her identification with him is marked in her own words, “May be he was inside and I was the outside of the same person”. The death of Shivraj brings home to her the need to assert herself in all aspects. At every point in her career, she proves that, “She had a mind of her own and in a position of authority, she would use it” (2008:14). The younger generations of politicians, who have leant their rudiments of politics from Shivraj and who showered “paean of praise” on him, have turned to the other side. The observation of the novelist at this juncture, “Shivraj's successors, playing at revolution, have set the clock back dangerously” (2008:15), is noticeable. Imbued with the spirit of democracy, Devi becomes an outsider in the changed political ambience. Devi's attempts at fair play in politics encounter much ridicule. Seeking selfish gains, they mock Shivraj's ideology. Devi's repulsion at the attitude of the co-politicians is revealed, when she felt, “I did not belong among these sheep and goats”. In the face of mass behavior of the Members of the House in Parliament, Devi assumes a dignified demeanor. The political party, which nurtured and matured her political philosophy, is no longer her support system. Perceiving the negative trends, she feels a ‘cast-out’, “There was a solid wall, a united will against her. She felt queerly isolated. The party, the great sheltering party under whose tutelage she had grown, was now an entity outside her” (2008:148). The character of Devi is aped after Vijaya Lakshmi Pndit, mother of Mrs. Sahgal. Sahgal's ingenuity in delineation of Devi's character has emanated from her deeper insights into the psychological deprivation of her mother in the wake of political setbacks, when Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister, which led to resignation of the former's position as Central Education Minister. This, in turn, has served Sahgal to relate it to Devi and her eventual resignation in the novel.

Usman Ali is another character in the novel. He is also affected in the changed political situation. As an adherent to the communist ideology, Usman has remained aloof from politics during Shivraj's time. Devi, in her capacity of Education Minister, compels him to accept the Vice-Chancellorship of Delhi University. Devi is prompted to make him the Vice-Chancellor by her belief in his fairness and honesty. With his obligation to Devi whom he calls fondly as Shahbano, Usman is unable to decline the offer. His patriotic fervor is evident in his steadfast



adherence to the Indian ethos and roots. But his wife Nadira perceives that he is more vulnerable for being a Muslim. She rebukes Usman for accepting the post Vice-Chancellor thoughtlessly. She persuades him that they should leave for Pakistan or any other country as a safe shelter from present turmoil on the campus. Nevertheless, Usman wants to stay here because he was born here and his forefathers before him. He feels, “he came from infinitely order, deeper roots in the soil than even Shivraj, the acclaimed hero with the much-vaunted ancestry” (2008:93).

Usman is bent on bringing fundamental changes in the functioning of the university. His attempts to free the university from the “direct hold of the centre” are viewed with contempt by the power wielders. He dreamed of “a native Indian communism with its roots in the village and its inspiration drawn from Indian heritage” (2008:27). During his tenure, an unfortunate and dreadful event occurs on the campus. An innocent and hapless girl student, Madhu, has been the victim of gang-rape by three students of the university. As a correctional punishment, Usman expels three students, a move which provokes the students. The demonstration against the expulsion of the students turns violent. Usman is assaulted and physically injured. Giving in to the pressure from the students and politicians, Usman has to revoke the expulsion against the rusticated students. As a measure in this direction, he prepares a document revising the educational policies and wants to make education autonomous. The framework aims at putting an end to the mushrooming of new universities and allows a free hand in functioning to the universities already existed. Usman conceives “a new pattern that stood education down squarely in its own cultural milieu and envisaged experiments where it became a two-way process between the teacher and the taught” (2008:130). Unfortunately, the document is turned down on the pretext that it is not in tune with the principle of social justice.

The changed political set-up brings pressure on yet another character in the novel, Michael Calvert, a reputed British journalist. To perpetuate the memory of Shivraj, he intends to write his biography. His arrival in India brings him a sense of disillusionment. The new rulers cripple the democratic process. Calvert’s intention to write Shivraj’s biography is thwarted in the name of new censorship policy. Michael couldn’t feel at home with the ‘obnoxious interference’ in the name of “vetting his manuscript’. He is aggrieved deeply that, “there’s a general *drift* in the direction of more controls...more censorship, though it isn’t defined” (2008:121). The intolerance of the contradictory to the official version of Shivraj’s biography has enervated Michael. The official biography by some bureaucrat, who never knew Shivraj’s character, is going to come out. It would definitely lead off for ‘stereotypes’. The genuine and hermeneutic discourse would disappear and scholarship becomes a ‘farce’. When the manuscript of Shivraj’s biography is rejected by the Parliament, Michael Calvert suffers a kind of dislocation along with Devi and Usman.

The novel also deals with a crucial problem in modern India of 1960s. The Naxalite movement and spread of violence are given a major rendering in the novel. The character of Rishad is central to this aspect of the novel. He is accompanied by his friend Naren, a Doctorate from Oxford; and his girl friend Suvarnapriya Jaipal, known



as Skinny Jaipal, a student of History. The trio represents the attitude of younger generation in the Post-Independence era. Their aspiration to bring an egalitarian society incites them with the spirit of rebellion. Notwithstanding his emotional attachment with the Naxalite movement, Rishad, “ a strong candidate for a coveted scholarship to higher studies abroad... that rarity, a real student”(2008:17), excels in studies and proves himself a cut above others. He would have reached a coveted position in social hierarchy, had he not trodden the path of Utopian dreams of establishing an egalitarian society through arms. His energies are trifled by preferring the path of violence. His cult of violence is rooted in bringing a new social order, with a passion for justice: No Utopia. Just food in the stomach and a decent wage. Utopia for the poor and the downtrodden. An Indian Utopia (2008:64).

According to Rishad, political Independence is a mere change of rule at high places. The fate of common man has remained as wretched as before. Rishad feels that the huge population, whom the newspapers call ‘the weaker section’, live from day to day from hand to mouth, are scarcely human. Rishad’s struggle against injustice takes a radical form. His resort to violence has branded him his co-activists as antisocial. While their goal is justified, the means, through which they intend to achieve it, are unsettling. They opt for violence as the only solution to root out the maladies afflicting society. While attempting to nullify the explosion of grenades, planted by his group in a cinema hall, Rishad meets his tragic end. Sahgal vetoes the power of mindless violence to establish equality in society. She points out that self-destruction is inherent in violence. Ralph J. Crane subscribes to the stand taken by Sahgal in her condemning the violence, “The actions of his group as Rishad understands too late, amount in the end to nothing more than aimless terror, aimlessly released” (1998:7[5]). In the portrayal of Rishad’s character, Sahgal has tried to project the most pungent problem, the civil society confronts in the contemporary times.

Undeterred by personal calamities, Devi exercises her will in the face of challenges. Their adherence to the ideology of Shivraj binds Devi, Usman and Michael together and they are shown as a political unit, crusading against the emergence of opportunistic politics. They derive sustenance and strength from their personal and ideological bond, in the midst of uncertain political fate. The death of Shivraj has brought in a political vacuum. It indicates Shivraj’s lack of foresight as political reformer. As a result, his ideology is washed out of the minds of his successors along with his physical disappearance. The small group of three, who zealously guard his values, are almost devitalized. Devi, frustrated by denials and disagreements develops nostalgia. Realizing the ground truths, she recognizes the irreconcilable disparity between herself and the rest in her own party. Usman and Devi are in an agonized dilemma regarding their future course action. But, with Usman’s advice, resigns to the post and party to wage an ideological war. Usman too resigns his post as Vice-Chancellor and joins the student movement to shape the movement from within, into a constructive venture. Usman feels liberated and ‘Master of himself’ to cure the illness in the society. Michael Calvert joins the two and is hopeful of publishing the biography of Shivraj with the help of Devi and Usman. Thus, though politically dislocated, they emerge strong, resolute and move ahead to bring their avowed tasks to completion. Their trust in Shivraj’s ideology and



his power is clearly pronounced in the words of Michael Calvert, “Perhaps we’ve in too much of a hurry to say he is dead” (2008:189).

## CONCLUSION

In this novel, the principle of freedom is dealt as a major aspect. With the death of Shivraj, the belief in freedom has been shattered. The inheritors of his philosophy are forced once again to begin, to usher in the spirit of freedom. The representatives of this group are Devi, Usman and Michael. There is yet another group trying to assert freedom through violence. The novelist implies, through the violent death of Rishad, that violence as a means of freedom would bring in its wake the element of defeatism. She points that this is a negative approach to freedom. But, critics are of the view that the novelist has exaggerated the character of Shivraj to display her hero-worship towards Pandit Nehru. The ubiquitous presence and impact of Shivraj’s character is found in every context of the novel. Her attachment to Pandit Nehru has made the novelist to ignore certain blemishes of his character. While fictionalizing the facts, the authors are expected to exercise restraint and should be objective. Sahgal seems to have fallen short of this requisite in her depiction of the character of Shivraj. Uma Banarjee observes, “Shivraj’s artificiality weakens the whole basis of characterization in this novel” (1993:196[3]). However, Sahgal has been enormously successful in rendering her characters in the novel to assimilate the spirit of freedom. Her attempts to show that any system suffused with the temper of freedom would ward off dislocation, frustration and despair. Her artistic achievement is manifested in her mingling the facts with fiction through the medium of men and women. To conclude in the words of Manmohan Bhatnagar, “Ms. Sahgal succeeds in making ideas or ideology come to life and in endowing them with the quality for stirring characters into passionate gestures and sacrifices” (1996:146[4]).

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