



POLITICS AS AN INHERENT ELEMENT IN SAHGAL'S FICTION

DR. K. GOPAL REDDY,
Head & Associate Professor,
Dept. of English,
SSBN Degree & PG College(A),
Anantapuramu.
(MS) INDIA

K. HANUMANTHA REDDY,
Lect. In English,
S.K.P. Govt. Degree College,
Guntakal.
Anantapuramu Dt.
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The function of literature is to catch the historical reality of the time, the spirit of society, expression of individualism and foreshadows of time. It represents the seething frustrations of the age and records the rebellious spirit. Every age has its own culture and in it resides the social ethos of the community. Any culture is the composite whole of various tendencies accepted and practiced by the people in a particular society. The commonality does not question it but literary man does it with all his thinking, imagination and new ferment of ideas.

INTRODUCTION

According to Shamota,

The soil which nurtures optimistic talent is the culture of the people, the tastes, spiritual demands and life of the artist's contemporaries. In other words the artist is only the co-author of a magnificent creation known as the culture of the people.¹

Mostly exploitation is resented by the writers and as such new ideas of social interest are forged by them. It happened in the days of the French Revolution. The banner displaying 'Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity' let the people fight against the monarchy. It was the result of the writers penning resentment against the monarchy and aristocracy. The organic nature of art makes it draw nourishment from diverse sources including politics, taken in its wider element of sense as embracing the multiplicity of contemporary scene with its economic, social and cultural aspects.



The relationship between politics and literature has been an interesting field of study. Irving Howe, whose *Politics and the Novel* is considered the locus classicus on the subject, casts more than enough skepticism on the impulse to assign literary labels and does not call his book a political novel. According to him,

By a political novel I mean a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or the political milieu is the dominant setting....²

In certain aspects, the political novel resembles the historical novel. A historical novel can be designated as a political novel when it specifies and directly deals with political history. A political novel is constricted to political aspects of history, whereas historical novel extends beyond political terrain, to social, cultural, moral and economic aspects of history. The political novel attains broader dimensions than a historical novel as it moves beyond history and addresses itself to living political problems, ideas and ideologies.

It has been noticed that a few Indian novelists have set their narratives in the recent historical and political milieu, skillfully weaving significant political happenings there in. A novelist opts for a factual background in order to find an order in the seeming welter of history. The very act of weaving a narrative in such a background is an act imbued with political consciousness and the novel assumes great significance as a political chronicle.

In this regard, we may refer to the paper Bhabani Bhattacharya presented at the fifth All India Writer's Conference at Bhubaneswar in 1959. According to him,

The creative artist has a compulsion to find an outlet for the living images in him. So I say, a novelist may well be concerned with today, the current hour or moment, if it is meaningful for him, if it moves him sufficiently into emotional response.³

Indo – Anglian novel since the beginning of its evolution has developed its indispensable bondage with the social – political milieu. The nascent national political consciousness, which gradually penetrating the Indian masses has been realistically presented by the early Indian English novelists, Kailash Chunder Dutt and Shukur. This prompted the other novelists to chisel the genre to articulate the message most effectively. With the emergence of Gandhi as the voice of the nation in freedom movement in 1930, the flowering of the novel intensified on par with the freedom struggle.

The freedom struggle, the British attitude and the growing disillusionment with the system have become the stuff of Indian fiction. The Indo – Anglian novelists directed their attention towards outlining the major political events as well as political aspirations of the people in



the form of fiction. M.K. Naik in his study of “The Evolution and Growth of Indo – Anglian Fiction” points out,

It was so thoroughly democratized that freedom consciousness percolated for the first time to the very grassroots of the Indian society and revitalized it to see a connection between this development and raise of the Indian novel in English; for fiction of all literary forms is most vitally concerned with social conditions and values. ⁴

Mulk Raj Anand, one among the great Trio, deals with both social and political concerns in his *The Sword and The Sickle (1942)*. Having been influenced by the communist ideology, Anand presents the struggle of downtrodden for economic and political power. From the point of view of the protagonist, K. A. Abbas in his novel *Inquilab (1955)* dwells on the totality of the Indian political scene of the period. Attia Hussain’s *Sun Light on a Broken Column (1961)* throws light on the team of social change and disintegration of the old hierarchical and agrarian society. The novelist vividly narrates the events before and after the partition of India through the consciousness of a young Muslim girl. Manohar Malgonkar, being alive to the happenings around him, also grounds his narrative with numerous historical events and places politics as an essential part of the spectrum of life in his *A Bend in the Ganges’ (1964)*.

R.K. Narayan makes use of politics only to achieve a romantic end in his novel *Waiting for the Mahatma’(1955)*. He emphasizes the impact of Gandhian principles on the theme but his primary concern is only on one individual, Sriram, the principal figure. Unable to understand the implications of Gandhian philosophy, he ultimately involves himself in terrorist activities quite contrary to Gandhian principles. No attempt is made to idealize Sriram’s interest in National issues. In fact, it is made subsidiary to his primary interest in a girl who happens to be a staunch Gandhian worker. Rajarao’s *Kanthapura (1938)* written in the convention of Stalapurana is the story of a remote village. The tiny village is stirred to life by the influence of Mahatma Gandhi. It stands as a replica of Satyagraha till it is suppressed by the ruling power. One finds in it at least three strands of experiences i.e the political, the religious and the social blended together.

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers (1947)* presents a three-fold matrix of politics blended essentially in human terms: the Second World War, the famine in Bengal and the course of events in the National movement. He denounces exploitation and exposes a moving spectacle of people reeling under economic and political depredation. Khushwanth Singh’s *Train to Pakistan (1956)* is the tale of a village existing on the Indo – Pak border with Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus caught in the web of chaos of the partition. It represents not only the communal temper of the Nation at micro level but also reveals the apathy of corrupt

officials, the outburst of passionate, religious, fanatics and the servility of the fearful time-servers.

Nayantara Sahgal has chosen to write against a political background because she grew up in an atmosphere oozing with political fermentation. It is justifiable to say, to use the words of M.L. Malhotra,

“That politics and sahgal are cousins or if a metaphor can convey it forcefully, Siamese twins.”⁵

Sahgal’s concern with the political themes and issues of current importance has been readily acknowledged. Whereas the most critics have treated her as just,

“Another novelist to treat the political issues of the time.”⁶

Nayantara Sahgal has a rare distinction of being the first Indian woman novelist writing in English, dealing with political themes. Starting her literary career in 1954, with her autobiographical work, *Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954)*, she has written novels and journalistic columns for newspapers, delineating the contemporary Indian political scene between India’s freedom and the declaration of emergency. She convincingly shows the changes occurred in India with the advent of freedom and the new challenges, hopes and aspirations of the people. This is what she has to say about her novels,

I deal with people and their situations but, looking back, each one seems to reflect the hopes and fears the political scene held out to us at that time.⁷

Politics is the forte of Nayantara Sahgal. As she is the daughter of Ranjith Pandit, a distinguished freedom fighter and Vijaya lakshmi Pandit, a remarkable woman who held important positions in national life as well as abroad. She is also the raven eyed niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, the lieutenant of the non-align movement. Politics is her background and her environment and it becomes her natural material. In the preface to ‘*Prison and Chocolate Cake*’ Sahgal writes,

We grew up at a time when India was the stage for a great political drama and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performance we have seen.⁸

Later in the same book, she says,

With us, the growth of political awareness was gradual and unconscious process and the most important influence in our lives.⁹



She herself explains that politics is embedded in her “bones and marrow”¹⁰

and in her

“emotional and intellectual makeup.”¹¹

To such an extent that she can no longer remain a mere passive spectator to the happenings with far-reaching fall-out affecting vital human interests.

Sahgal vividly describes the malaise of her time and illustrates it with her firsthand knowledge and her keen observation of the work of politicians. She analyses and interprets the various political events with perceptive mind and presents the individual responses to these events through her characters. She traces the growth and development of the individual consciousness against the backdrop of the changing political and social turmoils. Her protagonists respond fearlessly to the challenges of changes in the society they live in and move towards self realization. They, in each novel, project the views of the novelist on the latest political events.

The novels of Nayantara Sahgal contain a strong realistic basis and reflect not only her values but also the changing values of the society. She succeeds in rendering into fiction political issues as well as capturing the zeitgeist, the political mood and intrigues of the post – independence era. She exposes the politicians and bureaucrats who are divided not on principles or convictions but on nauseating hypocrisies and pretensions. Like Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, R.K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Mulk Raj Anand’s *The Sword and the Sickle*, Sahgal’s first novel *A Time to be Happy* depicts the process of politicization initiated into Indian consciousness when the first impact of Raj started bringing part of a political social order within the compass of politics. The first phase of Indo-Anglian novel, into which the above mentioned novels are included, is closely associated with the evolution of national history in India. Politics was life at that time and politics was the tidal wave of patriotism.

Storm in Chandigarh, Sahgal’s third novel, is a metaphorical projection of the theme of political violence everywhere in the Punjab and Haryana showing psychological impact on the minds of individuals. The bifurcation of Punjab into Haryana and Punjab on the linguistic basis nearly twenty years after the first partition based on religion is the situation in the novel.

Political tension between the two newly carved states regarding the boundaries, water and electricity is the theme and as the capital of two newly formed states, Chandigarh is the stage for action. The novel depicts the conflict between the opposite forces, Gyansingh and Haspal singh, Chief ministers of the Punjab and Haryana respectively.

Gyan Singh, the ambitious politician, can come to immediate grips with a situation and manipulates it to suit himself. He never hesitates to use violence as a means if it can bring quick results. Sahgal agrees, "Fiction often over shadows fact."¹²

She is well aware of the anticipatory nature of her perceptive political analysis in her novel. In the words of a critic,

*Storm in Chandigarh' based on the second division of the Punjab and the creation of Haryana state, with both... demanding Chandigarh as the capital was written a year or more before this even come to pass.*¹³

His megalomaniac visions of grandeur, glory and supreme strength have to be realised only in a negative sense. He instigates the people and calls for a general strike to demonstrate his strength. Dubey, the liaison officer sent to resolve the crisis between the warring states, 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. (167)

In contrast to Gyan Singh, Harpal Singh has always counselled non-violence which becomes his watchword in his career. He has tremendous faith in the Gandhian idea of non-violence. As a stout integrationist, he expresses his deep anguish over the division of Punjab... He is altruistic in nature where as Gyan Singh could be cynically egoistic

Dubey asks Harpal Singh to "make a stand" (211) as part of his strategy for aborting Gyan Singh's planned strike at the Bhakra dam. He says,

It's a risk,... 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... and that a man who believes, and correctly that he has only to call the tune. There is no room for such men among us. Let us take the risk. (212)

The political storm gathers momentum with the incidents like the violence that breaks out in the factory and the strike by the electricity men. Vishal Dubey suggests that he has to take a stand against the violent attitude of Gyan Singh.

Sahgal portrays the disintegration of values in politics and feels that Democracy has become a power game into which carnal savagery and machiovellian strategy have crept in. She strongly asserts that it is the conscious moral obligation of all right thinking people to protest against non-violence and injustice.

The novel concludes when Gyan Singh calls off the strike at the sudden demise of the union Home minister, the only surviving Gandhian in the Union cabinet. Thus, the storm is only temporarily mitigated. It is obvious that Gyan Singh calls off the strike only to save his own image, not because of his respect for the deceased Home minister. Finally, Vishal Dubay with his shrewed insight succeeds in restoring law and order in violence ridden Chandigarh.

The Day in Shadow brings a more complete picture of the political scenario of the late sixties with the belligerent new politicians coming to the fore. The scene of action shifts from Chandigarh to New Delhi, a haven for unscrupulous and profligate politicians and also for political corruption and social hypocrisy becomes the backdrop of the novel. Sahgal vividly portrays contemporary political scene with its inner contradictions and outer distortions. Anitha Mahajan deeply assesses the novel and comments:

Though mainly the novel revolves around Simrit and her struggle for new life, the novelist has also successfully handled the modern life of political leaders in the urbanised society of New Delhi. ¹⁴

Sardar Saheb, the senior minister, is unable to discharge his duties owing to his old age and illhealth. Sumer Singh is a typical representative of the present crop of belligerent politicians. He has no discrimination between the means and the ends. He never hesitates to convert anything to suit his ends. He is not willing to risk his political life. He firmly believes that popularity in politics depends on the cheer from the crowd and the old generation in the congress is completely outdone by him. Being the state minister of petroleum, he exploits power, exerting chair to its full extent. He flouts the non-alignment policy of the country and successfully pilots the official resolution on Government's oil policy and makes the deal with Russia under the pretext of future ties and friendly relations. He is soon rewarded with a promotion to the rank of a cabinet minister with the portfolio of foreign affairs. As a bitter critic of Gandhian values, he believes that

It is time to throw away sentiment, the weak, worn out liberalism of the past, time to bury Gandhi and write a new page in Indian history. (186)

Sahgal draws candidly majority of the modern post-independence ministers who have amoral attitudes. Problems of the country have no bearing on them. Politicians like Sumer Singh abounded in the new scenario, misuse the trust placed in them by the public. His immoral ways cast their shadow on the people around him. One of them is his servant, Bahadur who misuses his privileges and becomes a smuggler.

Raj Garg, an independent member of parliament is a staunch follower of Gandhian idealism and feels that post independence politicians capitalized on Gandhi's name shamelessly.



Sahgal's disillusionment with democracy in the contemporary Indian setup is expressed through the voice of Raj at different levels and when the soviet offer wins the majority vote in the parliament, he comments:

....well that democracy the victory of numbers and like progress it does not always do the right thing. (156)

The elevation of Sumer Singh to the cabinet rank is a clear indication of retreat from the moral and ethical values in politics. But Raj has the courage not to submit or yield. *The Day in Shadow* concludes on an optimistic note as the novelist suggests that the lone crusader like Raj will continue forever.

A Situation in New Delhi presents a disturbingly realistic picture of Delhi in post – independence era. Sahgal dwells on the failure of political machinery in the absence of a good leader. The novel also exposes corruption and opportunism in a seemingly democratic government. She describes the all pervading influence of Shiv Raj, the deceased Prime minister who in many respects resembles her uncle Nehru and points out that there is every need for a rededication to the values for which he stood for. But she expresses her deep concern for the decadence of values in Indian democracy in the post Nehru era. She herself felt the apathy, and a lot of hostility of the Government when her novel, *A Situation in New Delhi* was not allowed to be published during the emergency.

Gandhi also emphasized the importance of civil liberties. During the height of the Non-Cooperation Movement he wrote in *Young India* in January 1922,

We must make good the right of free speech and free association before we can make any further progress towards our goal..... We must depend on these elementary rights with our lives.

But Indira Gandhi grossly violated human rights and imposed restrictions on freedom of speech and suppressed the press.

Michael, the biographer and friend of Shiv Raj, gives the right analysis of his character. According to him, He is one of God's remarkable creations. For him, he is not an Indian but an Asian. He describes him as an ideologist who believed that there was a middle road between communism and democracy. He also calls him a politician who till the day he died had never earned to make a political speech or to trim his sails by the exigencies of politics. He was a dreamer who had shown utmost interest, from earth crust to astronomy, in friends and followers. The views of Michael clearly indicate that Shiv Raj stands for Nehru, the architect of modern India. In fact Sahgal warns people in the novel against the retreat from



the ideals of Nehru. Like his mentor Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru always strove hard to establish a government which showed its concern for the man in the street.

Devi, the education minister was disgruntled with the way government machinery functioned once the charismatic Prime Minister, Shiv Raj, her brother was no more. She felt humiliated to work with such opportunistic colleagues who did not possess an iota of his sobriety. She resigns to her post as she resembles Sahgal's bold women in other novels, those who walk out of suffocating situation, no matter what the price. She is determined to continue her brother's legacy of preserving national values.

Usman Ali, the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University, is hurt grievously in a student demonstration organized in protest against the expulsion of the students, responsible for the rape of a girl on the university campus. He submits a document in which he simply supports the recommendations of the commission appointed by Shiv Raj. He makes his point very clear that there is a dire need for providing outlets for skill enhancement before a student leaves the university. He also recommends to put an end to the mushroom growth of new universities. But the Government rejects his document on the ground that it ignores socio-economic implications. The student unrest and political intervention in the educational institutions compel him to resign to his post. Devi also joins Usman to start political campaign against the corrupt regime.

The problems faced by the Indian society today are to be found within the country, synthesized finally in the Indian heat that Usman must battle in his political campaign.

Michael went with Usman to the front door and opened it to the hottest day of the day. No trace of cloud or shadow hovered on earth or sky. An arsenal of heat mounting hourly since sunrise was poised to strike earth ward for the kill. In minutes after that the light would subtly change and start losing its fierceness as the day ebbed toward evening and unchained some cool from the stars. The men stood side by side, Usman clasping Michael's hand in his own, and then he strode out, his limp scarcely noticeable, a dusty warrior, to his car. (164)...

Usman is depicted in this passage as a warrior ready to battle with the gathering arsenal ranged against him. The political message of this novel is that one must do one's duty. To do nothing, as Krishna explained to Arjuna, is to fail in one's duty. It is in the light of this duty that Usman takes 'non-violent revolution' (P.146) to the streets.

A Situation in New Delhi thus runs almost like an allegory depicting the after math of political and national scene after the demise of Shiv Raj.



Sahgal presents the second decade of the twentieth century in *Plans for Departure*. One finds the echoes of independence movement throughout the novel and the various kinds of reactions of Indians as well as westerners to it.

Anna Hansen, the protagonist, takes some interest in the independent movement during her three months stay in India, Henry Brewster, the district magistrate of Himapur, sympathizes with the movement and opposes his wife's imperialistic attitude. Nitin Bose, the botanist, renounces his Sirship after the Jalian wallah Bagh massacre. Madhava Rao, a shop keeper, who has passion for British mannerisms earlier, decides to backup the ongoing freedom struggle.

Peter, Anna's and Nicholas's only son, marries an Indian, a political activist, "*a dynamo on the other side of the world*"(211) during the independent movement symbolic of the inevitable synthesis between the East and the West. Gayathri unlike her grandmother Anna Hansen, is very much practical in her approach and true to her politically active mother's legacy.

In *Plans for Departure* Sahgal vividly portrays not only pre-independence era but also suggests that the right path of enlightenment in the present political wilderness lies in the synthesis between the East and the West. It is more than a political novel as it reveals how the national prejudices destroy human relationships and emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding that transcends national identities. In the novel, Sahgal rightly suggests that one has to take every care to see to it that, to quote the words of Rabindranath Tagore,

"The world should not be broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls."
15

Sahgal graphically paints political and human fall out during the emergency in *Rich Like Us*. The novel also chronicles the past to demonstrate the sea – change which the leaders, their means, sense of ends, and also the institutions have undergone. The silence has prevailed over the nation as the trade unions were banned, the press got suppressed and bureaucracy politicised after the promulgation of emergency. Sehgal reminds us of the British regime where the basic human rights were curbed during freedom struggle. She makes references to Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement to create an environment to face the present transgression, the proclamation of emergency. Gandhiji vehemently opposed the inhuman attitude of the British and stressed the importance of civil liberty in social life.

*Civil liberty consistent with the observance of non-violence is the first step towards Swaraj. It is the breath of political and social life. It is the foundation of freedom. There is no room for dilution or compromise. It is the water of life.*¹⁶



Sahgal like Gandhiji is perhaps one of the most outspoken and impassioned champion of the civil and political rights of the people during the emergency. She stands as one of the intellectuals who fought for the restoration of democracy and human rights. She vehemently opposed press censorship and imprisonment of leaders without trial. As a measure of protest, she resigned from the executive committee of the Authors' Guild of India as well as the Sahitya Akademi Advisory Board. In a hard hitting letter of resignation, she wrote :

*We are not faced with a 'Political' issue in a normal political situation. We are faced with a dictatorship which was ruthlessly demonstrated its policies and intentions... The emergency has made it clear, if any clarity was needed, what kind of government we are dealing with in its naked disregard of democratic functioning and human rights.... I hope this situation will change but no change is brought about by a servile population and certainly not by educated elite that falls in line with every excess a dictatorship commits. I am very certain that I can be no party of this.*¹⁷

Sahgal portrays the facts of emergency through her fictional characters in *Rich Like Us*. The locale is once again New Delhi, where politics is always the undercurrent of life. The promulgation of emergency on the pretext of saving the country from anti-national and anti-social forces is nothing short of reversal of all the spirit of the renaissance in the pre-independence era. During the emergency, the Gandhian humanistic approach is completely eliminated and many of the intellectuals were compelled to take part in a thinly disguised masquerade, setting the stage for family rule. Sahgal indirectly makes references to Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi and depicts them as Madam and her son. No one forgets the acts of Sanjay Gandhi during the emergency. Through Sonali, the protagonist, Sahgal reveals how the mother and son controlled everything. This is clear when she says, “*You know perfectly well everything is controlled by one and half people.*” (32)

While the common people suffered severely, sycophants flourished well, the land-lords punished the share croppers severely as they asked for their dues. People were dragged to the family planning camps and got vasectomised forcibly. Slum dwellers were thrown out of Delhi to beautify it. Criminals were blinded by the police “*With needles dipped in acid to cure them once and for all of crime*” (30). Innocent people like, Kishore Lal, the shop keeper, are kept in prison on the charge of sedition.

Dev, a young entrepreneur On the other hand establishes a company in collaboration with a foreign company and flourishes well as he has intimate connections and influence in the political circles. The civil servants like Ravi Kachru, who is a loyalist of the high command, the ruling party, have been elevated to the higher ranks where as those who tried to adhere to the norms, like Sonali, are demoted.

The two sides, politics and the service were hopelessly mixed, with politicians meddling in administration and officers like Kachru, the prime example, playing politics as if his life depended on it. Today, one finds live examples where officers either by loyalty to the ruling party or by succumbing to political pressures violate the administrative norms and ultimately are brought to the court.

Against this nightmarish situation, Sahgal tells about the two honest women crusaders, Sonali, an IAS officer and Rose, the loyal English wife of an ailing businessman, Som Roman. As a conscientious civil servant, Sonali becomes a prey to “*The crumbling un-professionalism that bowed and scraped to a bogus emergency.*” (36). She refuses to write a favourable note on Dev’s fizzy drink factory and consequently she is “*demoted, punished and humiliated*”(32). Sonali, who inherited from her father, “*a positive kind of natural pride*”(119), tenders her resignation and adopts a leadership role to fight on behalf of the people. Anna Hazare, a retired civil servant from Maharashtra often goes on Hunger strike against the increasing corruption in the Government and against its anti peasant polices.

Rose, who always speaks frankly and takes sides with the right against the wrong becomes a nuisance for Dev, her stepson. He deprives Rose of her husband’s money by forging his father’s signature on the cheques. Since he has connections with the high command, the bank manager cannot help her. Finally the death of Rose in the hands of hooligans and the deterioration of values in politics are once again completely established. But the novel ends on an optimistic note as Sonali, starts a campaign against the dictatorial Government to restore democracy and protect the human rights.

Nayantara Sahgal’s literary canvas in a broader sense is defined as personalized fiction, History, Politics, autobiographies, and personalities intermingle in her novels and establish her reputation as a political novelist with a rare prophetic foresight and sensitivity. Sahgal’s success as a novelist lies in her ability to transmute the social, historical and political events of her time into the organic structure of the novel.

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