



SAHGAL'S IMPARTIAL TREATMENT OF THE PRINCIPAL MALE PROTAGONISTS

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ABSTRACT

The warp and woof of human relationships form one of the fundamental concerns of Nayantara Sahgal's fiction. Her characters behave as normal human beings do. They often succumb to their ego, commit errors, take wrong decisions, exhibit their weaknesses and some times they rise above them in triumph. They have various facets of their personalities. For instance, they are professionals, politicians, friends, parents and lovers. Her characters also struggle to define themselves and strive towards establishing relationships. They make all efforts to achieve their identities, which they ultimately discover, but invariably with the help of a friend or a mentor. Sahgal feels that freedom is the first requisite for the growth of inner-self and communication is the vital element to avoid breaking up of relations.

INTRODUCTION

Sahgal has achieved success in delineating characters by picking up from life and class around her. When asked by S. Varalakshmi in her interview whether a writer should confine herself to his or her social world alone, she replied,

We are all constricted by our experience and environment. There is no question that I belong to a particular class or society but my own feeling has always been that it is not a crime to be of any particular class. It is a crime to be unaware that there is another whole world around. My awareness I hope, extended more out towards into type of characters¹

Traditionally, man plays a vital role in the family as well as in the state, the smallest and the biggest institutions of the society where as woman is confined to the smallest one. In Sahgal's fiction, the male protagonist moves from one sphere of activity to another and becomes the connecting link between the two societies from the technical point of view.



A significant feature of Sahgal's fiction is that she introduces her theme of the quest for freedom through the delineation of male protagonists though surprisingly, she makes a scathing attack on the male dominated orthodox society.

Sanad, the Protagonist in *A Time to be Happy* is a young Anglo-Indian who struggles a lot to acclimatize himself to socio-political surroundings. He is caught between two worlds widely apart, one in which he has been raised and educated and while the other that existing outside his office, the British Raj. This is clear when he says thus ;

my body is in India, but my brain doesn't belong here. I might as well be an English man except for the colour of my skin. (232)

Belonging to a wealthy family, he has failed to reach his father's ambition to mould him strictly. Therefore, his elder brother Girish who is a product of the same upbringing and it's influence, fails to comprehend this unnerving dilemma of Sanad, when the latter is divided against himself, whether to leave his foreign firm or not. The development of Sanad grows out of his dilemma ultimately leading to his resignation from the British company. After resignation, he wants to be every inch an Indian and this is evident when he says,

"I don't want to feel like a stranger among my own people". (232) and "I must become familiar with my own country". (269) .

There is no worse situation than when he finds himself reduced to a naught after spending years, money and energy to groom himself in a particular way. Sanad too realizes that his westernized training has become a futile exercise. Unlike him, the other products of British education consider a job in a foreign company a lucrative one. It is the narrator who could feel Sanad's desperation thus;

He stood beside me now, this nearly English young man brought up to be a success, puzzled and uncertain about his future (4)

His sensitivity can not overlook the poverty around him. He is a dynamic person who develops from a raw state to a fully self-grown personality by the end of the novel. He questions the validity of western influence on Indian psyche and yearns to be a part of the history of the country of his birth. He doesn't accept the British blindly like his counterparts. The unsure ground on which Anglicized Indians like Sanad and hundreds of his ilk stood is painfully revealed in his own words.

It is a strange feeling to be midway between two worlds, not completely belonging to either. I don't belong entirely to India. My education, my upbringing and my sense of values have all combined to make me an un-



Indian. What do have I common with most of my country men? And of course there can be no question of my belonging to any other country (151)

The Calcutta outside the club is reeking with the foul odour while the rooms inside fabulously decorated, delicious food consumed by the aristocratic congregation to which Sanad belongs. The discussions on polo and fishing and unconcerned with the calamitous famine in Bengal, makes Sanad suffer from intense isolation. Two opportunities come in his way to search for his identity. Kusum, the daughter of Madan Sahai, a University professor inspires him to learn Hindi and advise him to walk in Gandhi's ways. She also motivates him to spin Khadi. It is through spinning at the village fair that he comes to terms with himself. His guilt complex makes him sensitive to the traditional and cultural heritage of India. Ultimately, Gandhian principles guide him to put together the fragments of his shattered personality into one.

Rakesh, the central character in *This Time of Morning* resembles Sanad in the first novel. In the words of A.V. Krishna Rao,

If Mrs. Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* is the story of Sanad, *This Time of Morning* can be aptly described as the story of Rakesh ²

Of all the men characters, Rakesh is perhaps the chief spokesman for the omniscient author. It is through Rakesh, Sahgal vividly delineates the contemporary life in New Delhi. He Progresses from a state of uncertainty into that of inner certitude which is primarily the expression of freedom. One may call it communication or discussion or self-identity, it is possible only in a congenial atmosphere of freedom. Inevitably, every major character in the novel strives towards the realization of freedom as a basic human value. His clash with Kalyan, the corrupt minister without portfolio, adequately brings out his opinion. He remarks, while commenting on Kalyan who gives priority to groups rather than to individuals,

A group was individuals what was needed was not the burial of the self but rebirth and celebration for the only hope for the people anywhere was that they should recognize and foster each other's humanity as individuals (136)

He finally settles down to have a discussion with Kalyan. "*Discussion always serves a purpose.*"(221) Having been emancipated himself from the oppressive bondage of inhibition, Rakesh is very much inclined to have the warmth of a normal family like that of Kailas, the PM's reliable assistant, Mira, his devoted wife and Rashmi, their only daughter. His desperation at not having such a family is wellexpressed in his own words,



Rakesh, sitting down to dinner with Rashmi and her mother, warmed to the familiar glow of their company. This was a family, even with Kailas away. These were people involved with one another. He and his father were just two people, not a family (43)

Unfortunately, Rakesh doesn't find the affectionate bondage in his family. But his life takes a new twist when Rashmi's separation from her husband rekindles his personal interest in her. It means the beginning of a new and mature relationship on the emotional plane in the life of Rakesh.

Rakesh identifies himself with the new national political happenings in Delhi and rises above the bickerings between the I.C.S and I.F.S officers. He calls on Kalyan for a discussion to sort-out their differences. Thus, his is the case of pilgrims progress from a state of uncertainty to that of conviction, confidence and inner certitude which, in a way, is symptomatic of the way towards realization of freedom without the use of violence, agitation or demonstration of tensions. Finally, he determines to have correspondence with Rashmi and feels that they have so much in common to share with each other. Rashmi too expresses her inclination to share her views with him. She says, "*Rakesh ?.... will you write to me. There's so much I'd like to share with you.*"(216)

Vishal Dubey, the protagonist in *Storm in Chandigarh* is an idealistic and upright civil servant. He firmly believes that isolation is not inevitable in life and learns that communication and candor can help anyone to establish an amicable relationship even in the worst situations in life. He understands that decent human relationships can be cultivated with care, interest and above all, love and truth to the maximum extent. In his interaction with his former superior officer, Trivedi, he reveals his concept of higher morality which transcends even the belief in conscience. This is clear when he says,

It's a search for value, and an attempt to choose the better value, the real value, in any situation, and not just do what is done or what is expected (80)

Very often one finds that suffering becomes the badge of honest people whose disinterested action, combined with an attitude of non-attachment likely to deprive them of intimacy and personal love. Dubey's marriage with Leela leads him to a great deal of mental agony and untold misery. When Leela, the self seeking woman becomes an audacious adulteress rather than an affectionate wife, he establishes affectionate communication with Saroj, a victim of her husband's Jaundice of Jealousy. He feels that his life is fully filled in her company and

. . . . an extraordinary sense of peace and happiness pervaded him. He wondered what was there in this impossible situation to be happy about a woman, not his, for whose well-being he was raked. But he knew his Joy was

for the fact that he had come home, and that a life time's belonging could now be concentrated on loving Saroj(222)

He expresses his deep concern for the Indian women who suffer silently and become victims of the male tyranny. This is revealed in the following passage.

He thought of his own country as the subdued sex, creatures not yet emerged from the chrysalis for whom the adventure of self expression had not even began. Whatever womanhood had once meant in India had been lost in the mists of antiquity. In its place there had long been a figure of humility, neck bent, eyes down cast, living flesh consigned to oblivion.(189)

Having understood the intense suffering of Saroj, he provides her much needed help and becomes her intimate friend.

The central Home Minister nominates Vishal as the liaison officer of the centre to the newly divided states of Punjab and Haryana to restore normality and peace. He analyzes him carefully when he has discharged his duties successfully as a ration officer preserving human dignity in refugee camps at the time of partition of the country. He always identifies himself with the virtuous, patriotic, truthful and the helpless like Saroj and Harpal Singh, the CM of Haryana. He becomes part of everything that has come into contact with him, a curious ecstasy of involvement with ground he walks on, the problem he is tackling and the people he be friends. He is the kind of a person who cannot get much out of a situation or a relation unless he gives his affection or loyalty to it.

He knows the importance of time in life and makes use of every second of it. He believes that everything that lives has a yearning for freedom and no power on earth can prevent it. He rightly thinks that, *'freedom is just an isolated political achievement'* (225). He insists that it should become a habit of mind or a way of life. He feels that sometimes solitude is inevitable but he has strong belief in the concept of dialogue and condor. He maintains balance of mind and does not goad a situation to climax. He is inclined to take hasty decisions under duress. He waits as he believes that waiting has a value and that worthwhile solution to a problem is seldom born of violence and high tension. Above all, he waits because it is the civilized instinct not to damage the smallest chance of a genuine change. Dubey advises Harpal Singh, the C.M. of Haryana to make a stand clear against the violent and despotic attitude of Gyan Singh, the C.M of Punjab. He counsels Saroj, the divorced wife of Inder to leave for Delhi in the interest of her baby. He endorses the conviction of Gandhi that every man or woman, however weak in body, is the guardian of his or her self respect and liberty. He instills confidence in Saroj and provides a new lease of life to her. At the end, he emerges as a champion of truth, non-violence, love and patience.

Raj, the protagonist of *The Day in Shadow*, is also a modern liberal humanist like Rakesh and Vishal, the Protagonists of *This Time of Morning* and *Storm in Chandigarh* respectively. He inherits the belief in the tenets of Christian humanism from his father. He has immense zeal for life and wants to find fulfillment in it. As he acts purely out of conviction, he always sides himself with the innocent victims. With his motto of ‘think for yourself’, he exhibits intellectual independence in his public life. He combines in himself the two essential qualities, Justice and gentleness. He always does what he says and never deviates himself from his words. In the words of Simrit, the divorced wife of Som and a freelance journalist,

‘with Raj ‘yes’ meant ‘yes’ and ‘no’ meant ‘no’.... He always did what he said he would do’(16)

Like Dubey, he is committed and wants to have complete involvement, if there is any involvement at all. He does not agree that fate is the answer to human problems. He wishes that people should be free-willed and creative as the world is on the threshold of immense changes.

Raj is critical of Simrit when he learns that she has signed innocently the divorce settlement prepared by her rich husband . He thinks of the divorce settlement as ‘*slow butchery*’ (40), But soon realizes that the monstrous divorce settlement of Simrit is nothing but the mirror of a whole culture, especially of a woman who always takes things lying down. Raj considers her meek acceptance of her fate an act of helplessness which is common for all woman. He says ,

‘The women angle makes about as much dent as an insects on a laser beam’(146)

Simrit gets a healing touch to her wounded heart and finds solace in the company of Raj. His spirit transforms her life metaphorically into a mountain pinnacle. Thus; “*From this high spot an immense valley of choices spread out before her gaze*”(236). Raj and Simrit closely resembling Vishal Dubey and Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* bask in the sunshine of freedom and exchange with each other “The good tidings of great joy” of life, deeply rooted in faith.

Committed to the public service, the involvement of Raj in the national affairs is complete and total. Being candid in his views and broad in his outlook, he remains an independent member in the parliament without yielding to the temptations cast on him by the political parties and expresses his aversion to the unity of amoral, opportunistic politicians. He calls it, “*shadowy beginnings of a vast alliance*”(152).

For him, India is almost his personal possession, in turn his delight and his devastation. Having seen politics from close quarters and gained practical experience, he understands that

there is a huge difference on ideological terms between him and his contemporary politicians who strive for selfish aggrandizement like SumerSing, amoral and opportunistic minister of state in the Union cabinet. He understands that they belong to different lines of thinking, though all of them, including himself, support the democratic form of Government.

Like Dubey, Raj also waits patiently and takes the decision at the appropriate time. Infact, he never discusses marriage with Simrit but only encourages her to be assertive and independent and aids her to regain her lost confidence as well as intellect. But at the end of the novel, when the situation demands, he suddenly declares that he is going to marry her. Thus, his character can aptly be described as a Christian by birth, a liberal thinker by temperament and a fearless exponent of his ideas.

Usman, the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University, in *A Situation in New Delhi*, claims India as his motherland as he is aware of the rich humanistic heritage of the country. He resigns to his post after the students' unrest. He is totally upset when political interference makes inroads into the university. The new aristocracy of ministers sit in a cool capsule cabinet rooms and forget the plurality of the Indian society. He says ,

We are a society at the cross-roads, all right, as the professors in the cabinet keep saying... But they don't realize how many cross-roads we're at, some in yesterday, some in tomorrow, some in the middle ages(41,42).

Despite the inclination of his wife to leave India, he is not interested to leave, especially at a time when the country is standing at the cross roads. He feels the vital need to move forward carrying everyone together to fight against opportunism and nepotism in politics. He is aware of the fact that

"Revolutions, if they had any meaning, meant putting oneself into the crucible of change" (30).

He rightly understands that nothing can be achieved by evading the problems. He inspires the students to face the hardship and instills the spirit of sacrifice to bringin political change.He exhort them to possess

"The Individual readiness for hardship, the personal desire for sacrifice"(58).

He affirms his faith in love, purity and soul's surmise for which Shivaraj, the deceased charismatic prime minister lived for. With indomitable will power, he makes sincere endeavors to restore the human factor to its proper eminence in politics.According to him,

“Revolution from the ground, a hunger and thirst for Justice in all forms” (117) should be the need of the hour.

He adopts non-violence as a means to achieve his ends, *“The only way most people in his country understand” (116).*

His idea is to establish a government *“with maximum power to the small community” (83 – 84)* to make people govern themselves in a meaningful way. His individual triumph lies in reaching the innercore of the people. Gandhi emphasizes the role of the individual in bringing about a change and says, *“The individual must learn to adjust his individualism to the requirements of social progress”³*

Usman, along with Devi, the sister of Shiva raj, starts his movement with a mission to build a new future for his country based on mutual faith, comradeship and participation.

Ravi Kachru, an IAS officer in *Rich Like us* was a committed communist when he was a student at oxford. He is unable to sustain his communist ideas when he faces the real world. Sonali, an IAS officer and his classmate at oxford tells about him thus;

Even when we did not agree with him, he was the inspiration of all us radicals and we never did understand why instead of throwing his lot with commitments after oxford changed his mind and joined civil service as I, in search of another kind of involvement had already decided to do. Within a few years Ravi is making his way up there hierarchy and when the emergency comes he is one of Mrs Indira’s favourites, the higher – up (176)

He falls into the trap of emergency which is declared only for the sake of family rule. Sonali notes this in a tone of detached despair. This is clear when he says,

“We all know this was no emergency... We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for a family rule.... No one wanted trouble. We played along, pretending to impress new clothes” (P 23-24)

Sonali wonders how canone make a journey from the communist manifesto to the royalist. Ravi becomes one among the numerous sycophants who,

“radiated sincerity.. earnestness and commitment”(26) and making a “ceremony of everything from lighting a cigarette to opening a conversation (27).



Ravi steadily climbs up the professional ladder through his unquestioning loyalty to the PM. Being a Kashmiri like Nehru, he has an added claim for proximity with the reigning powers. He takes different sections of the society to congratulate the prime minister and involves actively in vacectomy operations. But it is Sonali who successfully infuses reason into him by constant questioning. Ravi realizes that there is truth in her argument and recognizes that emergency was promulgated only to cover different kinds of atrocities and prolong the family rule. Moreover, he frankly admits that everything has gone beyond him by the time he recognizes the fact.

Ravi is bold enough to plead for the rights of Rose, the second wife of Ram though he knows pretty well that Dev, the only son of Ram, maintains close connections with the High command. As a result of it, he is demoted to the post of joint secretary. His love for Sonali saves him from the degeneration, and ultimately she restores him to rationality and reason. By the end of the novel, he falls from political grace but attains maturity to be honest on a personal level.

In *Plans for Departure*, Henry Brewster, the District magistrate shows his genuine sympathy for the Indian struggle for freedom. His anti imperialistic attitude turns him into a solitary being, as his British colleagues, friends even his wife are unable to appreciate his deep concern for humanity. The British officers recognize his anti- imperialistic attitude and as a result, he is posted to a remote hill station. At the time of the execution of Khudiram, a radical Indian freedom fighter, he performs his duty with stoic detachment. His sense of commitment to justice alienates him from the Britishers.

The dissolution of the marriage between Henry and Stella is caused by their political differences. Having been brought up in awe of the British empire, Stella is easily despondent when Henry falls short of attracting lime light. His attempts for reconciliation become futile. His wretchedness can be discerned in these words, when he says,

“She did not even know what I meant by love and we certainly did not have it in common. Love must be one of the most unequal dispensations on earth” (178).

Although Stella is recognized as *“the right wife who would be an asset to her husband’s career”*, (71), his egalitarian beliefs in a changing world are incompatible with her imperial convictions. So Stella *“one day without a backward glance”* (127) reaches Robert Prior, a British official in whom she finds regard for her views.

Fascinated and increasingly infatuated by Henry Brewster, a man *“Who suffered from philosophy and had chronic attacks of ruling conscience”* (28), Anna, a Danish spinster and the female protagonist, understands that he advocates freedom sincerely and insists that one

has to be human but not political. She takes on the mantle legacy of Henry and continues the same crusade for freedom in all spheres of human existence. Henry Brenster has tremendous faith in the concept of freedom and views all issues on the humanistic scale of values.

Bhushan Singh, in *Mistaken Identity*, is the only son of a federal Raja of Vijayagarh, a kingdom of the hundred villages in the Gangetic plain. On his return from America, he is arrested on the,

“charge of conspiracy to deprive the king, emperor of his sovereignty over India” (13)

He is moved to prison where he meets nine others compatriots, and forms ‘a study circle’ (21) along with them to tell his life story. He narrates and unfolds his unsuccessful love affair with a pretty Muslim girl, Razia that led to the outbreak of Hindu Muslim communal riots. He is haunted by his Muslim love Razia. Though he develops an intimate relation with a rich and flamboyant Parsi girl, Sylla, she fails to heal his wounds inflicted by his former love. In the words of the novelist, it is ,

“A very personal one of Bhushan Singh and his love affair with two women and his being almost haunted by his Muslim beloved”⁴

Bhushan Singh finds ample time on his hands in his cell to ponder over what Satya Brat Singh calls ‘Kafkaesque question’.

“His growth into man-hood is severely conditioned by this early inability to extricate himself to differentiate, see and recognize. Affluent at home and indulgent parents working out a cozy life for him are extensions of this womb – like protective and inhibitive shelter of childhood. This relates not to why he is in prison but why he is, what he is. The comprehensible imprisonment assumes Kafkaesque quest for identity in existence, ‘Who knows why any of us is here?’ “⁵

The mistaken identity, which leads him to imprisonment, ironically provides him much needed leisure and solitary state for introspection. He recognizes the spirit of independence of his, cell on the prisoners, who have the same goal of attaining freedom despite having contradictory ideologies. He develops close acquaintance not only with his fellow cellmates but also with the numerous freedom fighters outside the prison. He emerges as a champion of the weak and the down trodden. He marries the daughter of Yousuf, the communist leader with whom his mother forges a liaison which creates the most sensational scandal of the generation. At the end, he achieves his identity as well as freedom.

All the male protagonists of Sahgal are prepared to sacrifice anything for the cause of freedom. They have tremendous faith in love, mutual trust, sympathy, dialogues, discussion, understanding and humanism. They have the ability to think rationally. Being both theoretical and practical, they are trend setters. They feel that there is stagnation in the tradition and the individuals of the society have become victims of their own preconceived beliefs. They oppose the tradition bound milieu vehemently and condemn those people who lack courage and individuality. The most significant features of their nature is that they are never cynical but always optimistic of a bright future.

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