



SOCIO-POLITICAL TRAUMATA IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *STORM IN CHANDIGARH*

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ABSTRACT

Storm in Chandigarh (1969), the third novel of Nayantara Sahgal, is a factual political novel. It juxtaposes socio-political developments in Chandigarh, the common capital of the two north Indian states of Punjab and Haryana. It deals with the distressing conditions which have set in Chandigarh in the wake of the bifurcation of the state of Punjab into two states based on linguistic lines. The violence thus erupted in the city of Chandigarh receives the central focus in the novel. Mrs. Sahgal dexterously handles the political crisis in Chandigarh alongside the crisis in the lives of the major characters in the novel. As the title suggests the novel is woven round the political friction and the resultant fighting in Chandigarh. It also deals with the conflict between tradition and modernity. The novel stands as a metaphor for the storm in the political and social spheres of the city. The storm in the political echelons is due to division of the erstwhile Punjab, whereas the tensions in the private lives is owing to the disaster in the marital relations of some couples in the novel.

INTRODUCTION

The political action in the novel is represented by Gyan Singh, the gullible Chief Minister of Punjab and Harpal Singh, the unassuming Chief Minister of Haryana. The social fabric in the novel is represented by the couples—Inder-Saroj, Jit-Mara, Nikhil-Gowri and Vishal-Leela. The novel is a comprehensive design of the moves and counter moves in gaining political advantages. The skirmishes involved to grab power include the crafty manipulations and parading untruth as truth. All the individual characters in the novel suffer from

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discontentment, frustration, maladjustments, failed human relationships and psychological barrenness. Overall, the novel creates a very stark and bleak vision of the contemporary socio-political wasteland of the post-colonial India.

The very title of the novel indicates the turbulent political scenario prevailing in Chandigarh, the bone of contention between the states of Punjab and Haryana. The novel recreates the upper-class social milieu with trust on the political ambience. The title of the novel indicates the disturbing political atmosphere prevailing in Chandigarh, the pivotal locale of the action. The complex human attitudes, political manoeuvres, complex human relations, and the rational squaring of life are rendered intensely in the novel. The novel reconstructs the upper class social and political milieu. In the wake of bifurcation of the state of Punjab; Chandigarh, the common capital of the newly formed states of Punjab and Haryana, becomes the focal point in the novel. The novelist thoughtfully chooses Chandigarh to recreate the sporadic political disorder in the capital.

Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab and Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of Haryana are shown as just opposite political entities. They follow two different political ideologies. It seems to be the conflict between a pragmatic politician and an idealistic politician. The differences between the ideology of the two leads to a chaotic political ambience in the capital. It becomes the political onus for the Central Home Minister to bring the two loggerheads to the negotiation table to reconcile them and restore peace and normalcy in Chandigarh. As such, he deposes Mr. Vishal Dubey, a young, honest, and intelligent Civil Servant as an emissary to Chandigarh. The opening words of the Central Home Minister throws light on the simmering violence prevalent in Chandigarh, "Violence lies very close to the surface in the Punjab" (1). These words indicate the type of developments which may take place in the two states. A power struggle between the two states begins. Political situation becomes volatile and vulnerable.

The power hungry Gyan Singh is cunning and flamboyant. He incites wild political furies among the masses. He affects as if he were messiah of the labour classes. He wins the support of the labour classes. His actions are motivated towards grabbing power at any cost. But he poses that he fights for the cause of the people and the state. He does everything to satisfy his egotistic and materialistic pursuits. On the other hand, Harpal Singh, is a politician with strong principles. He is a prototype of Gandhian ideals and philosophy. He is blameless and loyal to the welfare of the nation and a true champion of the grassroot sections of the society. He is least anxious about capturing power. He is catholic in his outlook. He is very much pained with the division of the erstwhile Punjab. He vehemently opposes the act of partition of the state. He avers, "Mankind's journey was towards integration, not the breaking up of what already existed" (21).

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Vishal is assigned with the job of easing the tension between the two states. As directed by the Home Minister, he comes to Chandigarh. Vishal's inherent patience, his knack of understanding the human psychology, his abundant optimism makes him being entrusted with such a huge responsibility. Vishal, being an astute diplomat, becomes successful in bringing reconciliation between the two belligerent forces. By virtue of his understanding and efforts, he restores law and order in the states finally. But this success of Vishal Dubey goes unobserved. Soon after the violence in Chandigarh is cowed down, Vishal comes to know about the sad demise of the Union Home Minister. With the death of the Home Minister, political action in the novel ends.

Aligned with the political melodrama, we have the troubled man-woman relationships in the novel. The novelist shows the turmoil in the private lives of the couples namely Saroj and husband Inder, Jit and his wife Mara, Nikhil and his wife Gowri and Vishal, his wife Leela. The above characters think and behave in such a manner typical of the social strata to which they belong. Sahgal bestows more attention on the predicament of Saroj, one of the protagonists in the novel. She is married to Inder, an arrogant and insensitive businessman. Saroj cannot withstand the rudeness and unresponsive behaviour of a husband. She wants to let loose from the suffocating clutches of her husband and wants to liberate herself from him. Sahgal chooses Saroj as her representative to lash at the subjugation of women at the hands of the men in the male dominated society

The women characters in the novel experience an emotional aloofness in their marriages and feel total strangers in the dogmatic conservative society. Inder is a typical male and he does not accept the idea of woman the right to assertiveness and independent attitude of his wife. He feels that a woman is a sex object and she should be possessed under captivity. The chief mission of a woman is to gratify the physical needs of her husband and foster the progeny. According to Inder "a wife was one half of an enterprise, the complaint partner who presided over home and children and further husband's career" (46). In his connections with women, Inder misses the human factor and views them not more than physical possessions. He expresses this to Mara in no mincing words "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'll respect" (92).

Added to the woes of Saroj, a significant incident which took place during the college days of Saroj further broadens the already troubled marital relationship between Saroj and Inder. Saroj does not want to keep secrets from her husband and wants to share everything with her husband. One day in her innocence, she confesses to her husband that she shared bed with a boy during her college days. This guiltless confession of Saroj further strains the relationship

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between them. With this, Inder reacts violently. The beast in Inder wakes up and beats Saroj brutally. He becomes psychopath and indulges in wild nightmare hallucinations about his wife's premarital sex encounter. Even though he indulges in extra marital relationships with other ladies like Mara, he calls Saroj a sinner. He laments "the foundation he had thought rock had turned out to be straw and beneath it the unknown yawned" (86).

Saroj escapes from the life captivation and wants to begin a new phase of life with Vishal Dubey. For she feels that her relationship with Vishal is going to fill her life with the oxygen of understanding. She envisages such times which usher in happiness and freedom to express. By projecting the broken marriage of Inder and Saroj, Sahgal appears a true feminist thinker. Sahgal states repeatedly through the medium of her novels that mutual trust, understanding and respect should be the guiding principles for a strong emotional bond between a man and a woman.

In addition to the broken marriages, Sahgal depicts the extra-marital affairs and their short lived and ill effects in marriage. In the case of Inder and Mara, Sahgal suggests that their illicit affair between them offers no permanent solution except transient solace, since neither of them feels the sense of security and acceptance in their friendship. Mara puts-down Inder and settles to a happy life with her husband Jit. This renders Inder utterly disheartened and upset at the turn of events. Thus, Inder appears to be a man undone by his own idiocies.

On the other hand, Sahgal shows the reunion between Jit and Mara is the best panacea to strains in domestic life. The couple experiences many instances of separation and eventual reconciliation. It is strange to observe that the ill-fated developments in their lives of the couple is not due to the deeds of Jit, but due to the capriciousness in the attitude and the behaviour of Mara, who assumes high in life and wants to own the best in life, but fails to discern. She is torn between the ruggedness and of Inder and the fondness of Jit. At the end, she proves herself to be a sensible woman by knowing the pointlessness of hankering for such disparate things.

Sahgal gives the example of the marriage of Vishal-Leela to show how a marriage doesn't work out. In this case, Leela is the main culprit and plays the spoils. She is conceited and disloyal to her husband. Her fickleness ruins the marital bond between them. She uses Vishal as an astute diplomat and a status symbol to advance her wanton and clandestine desires. She makes Vishal a cuckold by having physical relationship with another man. This betrayal of Leela creates an unfathomable vacuum between them and Vishal undergoes emotional separation from his wife. Obviously, Vishal becomes a nonchalant outsider when Leela dies of a floundered abortion at the hands of an inept medico. To the joy of Vishal, he finds Saroj to be a companion for a life time whose presence gives him a feeling of a lifetime belonging.

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The characterization in the novels of Mrs. Sehgal is noteworthy. Maturity in the art of portrayal of characters is obvious in the novel. Saroj, one of the protagonists in the novel, is observed to be the replication of Rashmi from Sahgal's previous novel, *This Time of Morning*. Both are intelligent, sensitive and observers with an independent will to act and rebel against the domineering situations. The female characters in the novels of Sahgal appear to be bold and modern in their thoughts and emotions. They raise the voice to assert their individuality when they are put to humiliation and prejudice by men and the society. Saroj fits well into the definition of modernity in her outlook and defiance. Gita Rajan comments, "This aspect of presenting a new version of a modern Indian woman in completely common sense terms adds spice to Sahgal's narrative" (43). This aspect is repeated in this novel as well. Commenting on this aspect, Marcia P. Lui writes "As Rashmi grows to face divorce and trust her emotions again, Saroj grows in admitting the failure of her marriage, and in gaining confidence to accept the possibility of an honest and trusting relationship with Vishal" (47).

Sehgal applies the method of synthesizing the past and the present by using flashback technique. The narration of the action shifts from backward and forth to give a feeling of natural development of series of action. It is aimed at helping the reader to understand the unfolding of the action in the novel properly. It has both some intrinsic worth and shortcomings. Bala Kothandaraman observes "*Storm in Chandigarh* leaves the reader with a sense of aesthetic satisfaction ...It is tighter-knit and has a sharper focus on the fictive present than the others. These contain excess of 'flash backs' which render the narrative jerky and episodic" (27).

Critics like Shyam M. Asnani, opines that Sahgal has successfully recaptured the degenerated and hypocritical, political ambience in the post-colonial times in India in her present novel. He goes on to add the comment that "Nayantara succeeds eminently in exposing the politicians and bureaucrats on whom rests "the onus of the transition from servitude to freedom" (116). Sahgal's selection of Chandigarh to delineate the political and personal conflicts in the lives of major characters in the novel is apt. Sahgal dexterously presents the political gambling, battered human emotions, and the troubled human relations in the novel. She skilfully elevates the city of Chandigarh symbolically to weave the complex socio-political fabric in the novel. With settling down of the turbulent political atmosphere in Chandigarh, the storm in the life of Saroj also settles down. It is apt to quote the words of M. N. Sharma, "This emerging metaphor of locale, not merely as a centre of action, but, as a symbol of the conflicting temperaments, which in turn, represent India" (41).

In this novel, Sahgal makes an attempt to throw light on the dark side of the human nature which is the source of dishonesty, subordination and exasperation in human relations. The novel also tries to emphasise the need to the change prejudiced attitudes exhibited in the



name of tradition and some characters are modern in habits. Mrs. Sahgal refutes everything weighs down on the human psyche. The characters strive to liberate themselves in thought and action. Sahgal successfully project Vishal Dubey and Saroj as the torch-bearers and seekers of freedom in the political and personal spheres respectively. The most optimistic point in the novel is their turning a new life together where hypocrisy and deception are total strangers. The novel ends on a happy note with the both deciding to live together as better people. A. V. Krishna Rao rightly sums up the accomplishment of Sahgal as a leading Indian novelist in English that her creative development has reached culminating point in this novel. To conclude in his words, “Her creative sensibility digs deeper into the subterranean springs of the contemporary Indian socio-political life and comes with a fictional imperative, par excellence” (53).

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