

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 10 : 3 March 2010
ISSN 1930-2940

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Treatment of City in Nayantara Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh*

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Three Stages

Indian English fiction by women novelists reveals three stages in progress. (1)

- i. The early women novelists posed problems through their characters in their fictional work. This led to didacticism, sentimentalism and romanticism.
- ii. The second group of women writers forged individual styles and projected a vision that was unique. Three important writers of the group are Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Anita Desai.
- iii. The third group has given expression to the most recent problems. Feminism, free sex, isolation, alienation, identity-crisis or an individual struggling to be oneself are some of the major concerns of the women novelists today.

Nayantara Sahgal and Modern Sensibility

Nayantara Sahgal is a writer in Indian English fiction with a refined and modern sensibility, and a profound knowledge of the world around her. Her contribution to the Indo-English fiction is great and unique in her precise and scholarly description of the contemporary Indian political scene. Her novels portray the contemporary political realities and the disillusionment of the post-independence era in all concrete world (2).

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She tries to dig deep into the human mind by recording the individual responses in a particular situation. This, in particular, can be a situation in which citizens in a country are facing sudden changes in politics. She, undoubtedly, is a woman novelist raising her voice with the 'New Woman'. The central concern of her novels is the suffering caused to woman in the prison-house of loveless marriage and her suffering when she makes a breakaway (3).

From a Politically Well-Connected Family

To explain the personal theme clearly, she locates it against the political disruptions. Born to Vijaya Lakshmi and Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, Nayantara is the second of their three daughters and the child of a rich heritage. Her parents, including her mother's brother Jawahar Lal, were actively engaged in the country's struggle for freedom. Consequently, politics entered the life of the Pandit girls at an early age (4). In almost all her novels she has shed her emotional self, as any writer knowingly or unknowingly does: as D.H. Lawrence said, "One sheds one's sickness in books."

Speaking for Modern Women

Nayantara Sahgal is a writer speaking for modern woman, the 'New Women'. Traces of an Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization can also be found in her fiction.

Monroe K. Spears in Dionysus and The City (Pg. 93) speaks of "The introduction of the city as principal subject of fiction in English" and depicts the handling of this new subject in a manner which is distinctively modern (5).

As the civilization stepped forward, city played a pivotal role in the history of human life. It has become the centre of human activities, showing all the various aspects of human life and hence an important entity to enhance our knowledge of human behaviour.

The City

The word 'City' has been drawn from civitas – city-state, which is probably a synonym of cives – citizens. To be precise, City is a society of individuals who donate to an ideal of rational order. Thus it is physical as well as ideational. The physical city is a mere mirror image of the ideal, and the actual societies and institutions are imperfect pictures of it.

The city, for the moderns, is seen as descending in values. Things here fall apart, the centre cannot hold. We see here towers upside down in the air. The city is seen moving in the negative direction, towards the infernal city.

Many literary giants have celebrated city in their works when cities became centers of all kind of activities and expansion. Some writers give realistic pictures of real cities of the world at particular stage of time. Others took real cities and transformed them into imaginary ones as in the case of Thomas Hardy and R.K. Narayan.

In fiction, city also has come out as a character, a powerful figure affecting the lives of individuals living in it. Lawrence Durrell and Anita Desai amplify the above fact. In *Alexandra* of Durrell every new person coming to it becomes corrupt and lecherous and *Calcutta* of Desai makes the citizens nihilistic, driving them to death.

There are also many writers who take a decision to make a city the milieu to plant certain characters or ideas into particular situations. Now, there is no doubt that place where one lives certainly determines the mental health, controls the habits and behaviour, and moulds the character and personality of an individual. Therefore, an impressive relation between the people and places is found.

The City and the Individual Freedom

In some fictional writings city is used as a device, an index, to reveal and read the psychology of the inhabitants. Nayantara Sahgal's central concern, in most of her novels, is the concept of individual freedom. That is why her heroines, so deeply rooted in Indian culture, are portrayed as struggling for freedom and trying to assert their individuality in their own right.

Storm in Chandigarh

Sahgal has tried to understand the male perspective too. Women writers generally tend to adopt a feminine posture, which is understandable, in passing strictures on male and exonerating the female. But Sahgal offers, a scathing analysis of the ideal and the real marital relationship. Vishal in *Storm in Chandigarh* for instance, is the victim of marital discord himself. Vishal's marriage with Leela, had been a vanishing search for communication. Nayantara Sahgal, despite her feminist sympathies, shows a superior and steadfast understanding of male mind.

In Nayantara Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh* the evil of violence is projected in a skeleton form. In the very beginning, we find the Home Minister worried about violence in the city; he thought that the violence lay very close to the surface in Punjab. The story goes back to the fresh past of the partition of Punjab and Haryana.

The main subject of the squabble is the question of the possession of Chandigarh, the City Beautiful, and the capital of the Maha Punjab. The Home Minister appoints a young and intelligent civil officer named Vishal Dubey to get things settled in the region to calm the political turmoil in Chandigarh. A feeling of restlessness and insecurity is prevalent in the city. Dubey in a fine mood of contemplation throws light on this aspect of life:

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Outbursts of brutal, calculated violence had become a feature of the cities. There were too many in the congestion and chaos who had nothing to lose by violence, too many others who sat inert and indifferent... violence had become routine and expected. It was given different names, indiscipline, Unrest, disorder... (p.12)

The Psyche of the People in the City

Nayantara Sahgal in Storm in Chandigarh has written a story in which due to political turmoil in the City, the life of the citizens is affected to a great extent. No doubt, conditions prevailing in a place influence the psyche of the people living in that place. Chandigarh initially was supposed to be a poem in architecture. Its birth was an achievement of great architects' planners and engineers like Le Corbusier, Aditya Prakash, N.S. Lamba, Kewal Krishan, Pilloo Modi etc.

Indeed it existed as the actualization of dreams of several great intellectuals like Jawahar Lal Nehru and others. People stayed there to go ahead with a life of happiness and satisfaction in this abode of beauty and peace. Jit tells Dubey in his first meeting that he had settled there to live a happy life after coming out of the fires at Lahore during partition of India. Chandigarh was something more than a place, a city, for those who had faced the fears of bloodshed.

The City Beautiful was an actualization of temperate, human dreams. But politics at high level had disillusioned the life of common citizens. People like Jit, Mara and Saroj feel uprooted and deceived by the violent political situation. Jit tells Dubey of his personal dislike of this politics which has occupied in him the position of an outsiders and problem-creator in their lives:

Mara and I decided to settle in Chandigarh we thought it would be the one place in India that would be immune from this sort of thing. (p.54)

He is of the view that politics ('this sort of thing') has come into the calm life around and brought a storm in the emotional life of people.

The Story of Individuals – Justice and Injustice

The storm also enters Saroj's personal life through the worker's strike at the mill. Her husband Inder is warned by the workers with their demands and finally violence comes in the factory, the labourers attack Inder. His whole life becomes quite a muddle. Now the question arises how to tackle the violence in all the fields of life.

The main problem scrutinized in Storm in Chandigarh is of taking a stand against injustice and oppression⁹. The Storm (violence or disorder) here influences at two levels: political and personal. At political level the storm enters the foundation of Chandigarh with the partition of the Maha-Punjab into Haryana and Punjab.

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The struggle started between two types of people: the first were those who wanted a state in which the only language approved was Punjabi: the second type was those who did not want any partition in the state. This political disharmony is suggested in the novel through an antagonism between the two Chief Ministers: Harpal Singh and Gyan Singh. Gyan Singh stands for the first type of people stated above:

Gyan Singh, as Harpal had discovered long ago, had never wasted time on emotions and beings: he had always displayed a ruthless attitude while dealing with a situation and for him there is always a bargain to be struck. (p.25)

Gyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Punjab, uses every trick of gaining power in politics. For him it is only the end that matters, whatever the means might be. When people were burning in the funeral pyres of the partition of India and Pakistan he had made a lot of money. He is a person who is acquainted with how to grasp a situation and extract sap for personal gains.

Physically a gigantic person, he knows his powerful impression over the other and gains a lot from it. He gets support over the issue of Punjab by announcing that Punjabi should be the regional language of Punjab, because Punjab belongs to only those who are Punjabi-speakers by birth. He also accumulates knowledge and uses it to prove his selfish point. He describes the past history of Punjab and claims that Punjab, and only Punjab, had legal rights over the waters of Bhakra-Dam. Using malpractices he gains public sympathy and a grand following.

Politics Degenerating into Money Making

During post-independence period politics had degenerated to moneymaking, power hunting, personal-enrichment. Sahgal in her work does not profess any specific political ideology; she also does not profess any specific politics values. But she does point out that the ill influence of politics has spoiled the healthy stream of personal life.

The politics of non-violence, patience, forgiveness had been left no place in the post-independence era. Now it was violence that had entered the political scene and it had affected life in cities. Violence had become a common feature of city life. The metaphor in the title of the novel suggests that it was the uneasy political situation in Chandigarh that provides the basis for Nayantara Sahgal's story. This fact is proved when the novel is studied from the political side of the coin.

Fiction – A Record of Human Familiarity

To be accurate and clear, fiction or literature is a recording of human familiarity. While reaching out on humanitarian basis, it is found that the novel explains the storm in personal life of the characters also. It is this uneasy situation in Chandigarh that

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everybody living in the city is in tension and under the clouds of insecurity. Almost all the characters-Vishal, Harpal Singh, Gyan Singh, Home Minister, Jit-Mara and Inder - Saroj have a fear. The main reason being the strike at the Bhakra Dam.

The common life is in the clutches of doubt and fear. When Vishal Dubey, the civil servant, comes to Chandigarh, he realizes that the situation had gone out of control. He is a man of profound knowledge and keen perception. He knows that Gyan Singh could not be persuaded away from the strike. In his effort to understand the real situation he senses a great difference between the personalities of Harpal and Gyan. First he believes that it was a conflict of personalities.

One likes coffee, the other likes tea. Or one gave the other a black eye at the school. Or some private feud about something. There doesn't seem to be any real difference. It's clash of personalities, but that's what politics has degenerated to. (p.20)

A further study into the affairs gives Mr. Dubey an insight into the characters of Harpal and Gyan. Vishal finds the situation not only vicious but depraved to the limit of paralysis. During one of his walks with Saroj when she asks him what had happened that one felt insecure along one's own streets in one's own town, he replies:

I suppose one doesn't notice the things that happen gradually. We seem to have slipped into a kind of decay. One big upheaval might have had some meaning, but this noiseless chaos, like the ground dissolving as you walk on it, is uncanny. (p.87-88)

The Storm Has Gone Deep into the Roots of Human Soul

Thus it can be seen that the storm has gone deep into the roots of human soul; fear has harassed the very existence of the citizens living in the city. Moreover it is not a battle merely between two persons. No doubt, Gyan is an ambitious person without any prickle of conscience. For him nothing matters in the way of personal success, as long as things go in his favour. But Harpal is a man of some substantial human values. He, like the Home Minister, doesn't want any partition. For him co-operation, prudence and patience are the watchwords. His idea of life is to wait and watch; the problem with him is his inactivity. In conditions of turmoil he cannot work properly. In this crucial situation, he feels ambushed and helpless like all others in the city.

Harpal's mental balance is threatened due to the crisis in the atmosphere. For him the big vision has fallen to pieces. He wants to resign, but resignation is no solution. The solution lies in taking a stand, otherwise suffering is unavoidable and of course, Harpal suffers in the end. Saroj is another victim of the chaotic situation. She suffers in the very home of her own "in broad daylight, amid laughter and conversation while the sun shone". She does not get the due love and regard from her husband Inder, although she is quite a

loving, innocent and submissive lady, never speaks against him even if he doesn't deserve a mild treatment.

Inder is unable to forgive an act of hers that she had done during her youth, although she doesn't hide anything from him. Inder, like Gyan Singh, is a person who has "disdain for other human beings". No doubt, such people achieve public sympathy but they don't deserve it. Inder is worried with the idea of purity in woman. When his wife tells him that she has had physical relations with a friend before marriage, he becomes violent. He is the symbol of primitive man's supremacy over woman.

Moreover, he thinks his wife to be a mere thing in his control. He treats Saroj badly, even manhandles her. There is usually a sort of cold war between them and this hurts her emotionally, too. She doesn't retaliate with any sort of violence. Inder always denies her endeavor at a fair communication in their marital affairs. Thus, their relationship stands on an undercurrent of disorder, violence and restlessness.

Vishal Dubey proves to be a link between the political and personal worlds in the novel. A man of reflective understanding he takes things in their right perspective. According to him a relationship based on love, faith and frankness always succeeds. Man can lead a life of happiness by being honest in his relations with others.

Why People Suffer?

The answer to the question-why people suffered? lies in the fact that they hide their inner realities from their fellow beings. Much that went wrong between men and women, between people, lay in what they withheld from one another. According to him decent human relations are made to happen –

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. All of that reduces the heartbreak and a lot of the loneliness of living. But it is damnably hard to do. (p.91)

In case of Inder and Saroj, even with Saroj's patience and suffering, the relationship breaks, the reason being Inder's blindness to her efforts. Vishal tries to help; Saroj is quite expressive and vocal with him. He tries to safeguard Saroj's individuality, her personality and saves her from a breakdown. When Saroj goes to Delhi leaving Inder behind, it proves to be the saturation point.

Effect of the Storm in the City, Outside of the City

Thus, the storm in the city has had its effect even outside the city. The atmosphere in the city poisons the life of the citizens living in it. The picture of Chandigarh painted by Nayantara Sahgal is not ugly or down to earth, but it is, undoubtedly realistic. She is an

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observer of the drama in the city of sixties of the last century. It was made the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana on November 1, 1966. Not a mere patch work of cement and greenery, it was a biological phenomenon.

Le Corburier aimed at the creation of a poem in architecture, although people have different views about the beauty of this city. There are also some who opine that Chandigarh is a disgrace. The main issue of the controversy lies in the borrowed architecture, design of the city. People believe that Corbusier gave us a third-rate Chandigarh with a miserable, colourless and baseless architecture.

The Physical and the Spiritual

Nayantara Sahgal in her work has described the physicality of the City also. She has described the houses and the complexes of the city, although not elaborately. She has a dig at the planned interiors of houses in Chandigarh, transplanted architecture and the capital complex, especially the legislature building, which is sandwiched between the Secretariat and the High Court. When Gauri visits Inder and Saroj, she is not very much appreciative of Chandigarh.

Although Nayantara Sahgal is all praise for the High Court building, which has immense antique grandeur about it like an ancient temple, yet it is the most magnificent and dramatic building in Chandigarh. The overall effect of the open air at Chandigarh is healthy, still something is wrong somewhere, about its designing and planning or administration. For inhabitants, Chandigarh originally was meant to be an administrative city, as well as a city where those, who lost their houses in the fires of partition of India, were to be settled. These people bought residential plots in the city at quite cheap prices.

When writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Balwant Gargi and Balraj Khanna visited it and lived here during sixties and seventies, the city left a deep impression on them and they tried a few powerful attempts in fiction making Chandigarh as the locale.

The First Novel on Chandigarh in Indian Writing in English

Nayantara Sahgal was the first in the annals of Indo-Anglian fiction to write a novel on Chandigarh. Her novel Storm in Chandigarh is a product of her stay in the city during sixties, when she was trying to release herself from the clutches of Nehru family to fall further into an emotional pit. A semi-autobiographical book, it delineates various shades of characters living in the city during the period when the Punjab was divided into Haryana and Punjab, and Chandigarh was made the Joint capital.

Now being an outsider in the city or having some political, academic and personal reservations, Nayantara cannot be blamed for not dealing with every facet of the city. An analysis of the characters in her Storm in Chandigarh suggests that she knew only those people of the city who belonged to the upper class and came from outside.

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Story of Jit Sahani

These people were not born and brought-up in the city itself, but born outside they came to the city to fulfill their dreams. Sahgal's Chandigarh is "The city of the persons who were born somewhere else and came here in quest of something great and sensational". Jit came to the city with his wife Mara to lead a life of peace here thinking that it would be free of any sort of violence. Living and settling in the city was to him a start from scratch, a second start at life.

Jit Sahni is an industrialist paving his way successfully in the field. He belongs to that class of society, which has got riches to enjoy, and a mild, sophisticated nature for love. But he lacks that down-to-earth quality in his character that makes a man a loving and perfect husband. Undoubtedly there is love between him and Mara but at times they feel like strangers to each other.

In fact, Sahgal has portrayed a society of changing values. With the advancement in every sphere of life, perspectives towards things changed; human relationships also got affected under the complex conditions. With the dawn of independence great change occurred in social, religious, economic and personal affairs of the people:

Partition – Tragic Days and Years

During those crucial years of struggle for independence, of partition and its aftermath, our traditional social frames of reference such as religion, class, caste and family were put to severe test and our emergence at the end of it all as a free nation with secular and democratic standards has indeed been a major break-through to a different order of social perception. It is the depiction of this struggle and the achievement of this new order of social perception that should mark a truly Indian or Indo-Anglican novel.(p.104)

Years of Freedom

In these secular and free years the New Woman is bent upon to lead an independent and self-sufficient life. Mara is happy with Jit, but she also develops a love-relationship with Inder. To lead a life in all its fullness she wants both the softness of Jit and the hardness of Inder. She enjoys all the desired freedom from her husband; leads life in her own style. The couple Jit-Mara represents the educated and rich section of society in which wine is a simple part of culture. When Inder visits them with his sons Bunny and Muff, Jit offers him wine in hospitality and hopes that Bunny and Muff will also like a drink. Mara is both beautiful and intelligent and her relationship with Inder is not to satiate the physical appetite but to feed the inner appetite for fullness in life.

Business Culture

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Inder belongs to that class of businessmen for whom success is counted very sweet. Such persons are blind to the joys and sorrows of others. Moreover, he is a self-loving person hating others and using them like tools. His wife Saroj is a mere thing in his possession; he thinks he can use or drop her anytime he likes to do so. Even with Mara, although he becomes slightly aware of a feeling more than physical, he withholds his self, which becomes the reason of his suffering at the end. Saroj leaves him alone and her act is justified due to his animalistic nature.

Sanctity of Human Relations

Sahgal is concerned with the sanctity of human relationships. She believes that a relationship causes injury and inflicts pain if people 'withhold (hide) their real selves.

The marriage of Saroj and Inder is proving disastrous to Saroj's personality. She has been left with no choices or habits of her own. No happiness for her but always a fear of being misunderstood. In her life, many days pass without even a word with her husband. A supersensitive lady, she is afraid of the drama of the unsaid. There is no smooth communication between her and Inder and their talk inevitably leads to a quarrel.

The loss of her virginity before her marriage is a nightmarish thing for Inder to forget and forgive. The result is that he is not fully involved with her, which she regrets highly. Moreover his thinking is quite old-fashioned; he is not ready to assume a woman equal to a man. He says to Mara in one of his fine frenzy:

Put it in whatever smart new language you like, it's a lot of bilge. 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.
(p.154)

City with Double Human Standards

Sahgal's Chandigarh, thus, has people with double human standards. People like Inder are materially and socially advanced, yet unable to accept the modern revolutionary human values. The unsatisfactory and unfulfilled relationship leads Saroj to revolt. A bond of lovely understanding is established between Saroj and Dubey. They share similar views due to their similar nature.

In Vishal's company Saroj can express herself very adequately without any tension. Inder cannot tolerate this thing, although he himself has invalid relations with Mara. It is his unsympathetic attitude that forces Saroj to leave him alone and go to Delhi, where she will be joined by Vishal Dubey later on.

These criss-cross relationships in the novel make the reader to contemplate over the question of the sanctity of human values. Dr. Srinivasa lyengar exclaims over the "set" in

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the novel and remarks that it is like a chapter from John Updike's *Couples*²⁶. But it can be said without doubt that in the delineation of such relationships, Sahgal shows authenticity in her art and realism in her treatment of the city.

Sahgal's Chandigarh is a city of rich and prosperous businessmen, of intelligent New Women, and intellectuals and politicians striving hard to find solution to the problems. The healthy air in the city enriches them physically and mentally. It is not merely a heap of buildings, but a home, an atmosphere, an abode of peace, fulfilling Le Corbuser's dreams of a beautiful, living city. But this city is in a mess, not in a settled condition, as says Gauri on visiting it. Storm has raided its limbs and it lies like a terrorized helpless creature. Storm pawns from the high skies of politics creating waves of unrest in one layer of society.

In personal life of citizens a crisis can clearly be traced. There are critics who say that the crises at the political and personal fronts are not thematically related to each other²⁸. But the fact remains that if there is tension in the air of a place; people living there are also troubled. At least the ordinary inconveniences are inevitable and they make life stuck in vacuum.

It is the stormy situation in the city, which plays a great role in Saroj's bidding farewell to Chandigarh, a "home" to her. Under such critical conditions bearing a child was not safe. What else can be of great fear than this! Moreover Vishal proves a link between the two spheres. Sahgal herself has stated at times that atmosphere works on her powerfully that is why even foretelling of events has been possible for her especially in Storm in Chandigarh and The Day in Shadow. When she was writing the latter the whole political atmosphere of the book became so strong and overwhelming, it almost became another character, with a life of its own.

Modernity Is Confused With the Western Style of Life

Modernity in India is often confused with the western style of life. What confirms to western ways of dressing, eating, drinking and social get-together is regarded as modern.

Nayantara Sahgal also touches tradition and modernity in terms of ethics and morality. Ethics and morality have been given distinct identities and meaning by the modern educated people like Trivedi and Vishal Dubey. For instance, Dubey would not subscribe to what is commonly understood as morality. Trivedi suggestion that Dubey might believe in free love, and that sort of thing makes Dubey laugh. He, while declining his inclination towards free love, declares that he does not accept the established ideas about morality.

In Storm in Chandigarh the novelist has reflected the turmoil in life through the political drama. The novel is a proof her clear thought, vision and maturity. It gives an insight into the life of high ups and delineates the frustration among the young couples in dramatic

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terms. Sahgal shows apt competence in handling the delicate situation. Her artistic effort succeeds in a reliable and competent treatment of the city.

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All Quotations having page numbers are taken from the following text:
Storm in Chandigarh. New York : W.W. Norton and Company. Inc, 1969

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