

## Chapter Two

### Nayantara Sahgal : Challenging the "Received" Version of History

Among the women novelists of Indian Writing in English, Nayantara Sahgal emerges as a powerful voice to challenge and question the "received" versions of history. She not only calls the officially-ordered 'histories' into question but also exposes the male-dominated and patriarchal power-structures behind them. By delineating India's history and politics in her fictional narratives, she creates an alternative discourse in order to subvert them and thereby construct her own writer-specific version. She achieves this purpose by using the various narrative techniques and devices and puts them side by side with the official discourse. Sahgal's fiction also centres on the political history of India and how it has affected the perceptions of ordinary men and women. Her main interest, however, remains to raise the questions of women and so the basic purpose of revisioning India's history in her fiction rests on her concerns with the social and individual problems of women and their search for identity. Sahgal herself has overcome her problem of identity-crisis through her writing : "I began, through the writing process, to unlearn all I had been taught including that overpowering mix called history-culture-religion and to discover who I was through the words I put on a page" (*Point of view* 32).

Born into an elite Brahmin family, which was an active participant in India's struggle for freedom, Sahgal has been a close observer of the political arena of the nation. In fact, her own political consciousness grew with the growth of the nation and she was a keen witness of every major and minor political event. She confesses in her interview that "[T]here is always a

political background in each of my novels" (Varalakshmi 11). In her autobiographical book *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, which was the fruit of her mulling over the nation's growth and her first published book of non-fiction, she admits again : "[W]ith us, the growth of political awareness was a gradual and unconscious process and the most important influence in our lives..."(Varalakshmi 14).

Despite her interest in the political world of the country, however, Sahgal uses it only as a framework in her fiction; for she is much more interested in the description of the women who are surrounded by the political milieu in their lives. For this reason one finds that Sahgal has created a galaxy of women protagonists in her fiction. They are almost invariably the prototypes of the novelist herself. There are very few male characters who are sympathetic to Sahgal's feminist agenda; but mostly they are portrayed as ally of the power-structures constructed by patriarchy. Her women characters are shown to be the victims of cruel marriage system and therefore they strike a strong key-note by breaking away from unhappy marriages. Articulating her themes of marriage and divorce in her novels, Sahgal comments that "...in a free country like ours where women are equal citizens, a woman can be criminally exploited without its creating a ripple" (*Point of View* 17).

Apart from describing women's situation *vis-a-vis* the political scenario of India, Sahgal does not ignore the legacy of the ideals as nurtured by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. In her early writings, therefore, one examines the influence of Gandhi's ideals of non-violence and Satyagraha. At the same time, being a niece of Nehru, Sahgal also looks at the future of country as envisaged by her maternal uncle. There has been a streak of undiluted respect and adoration towards the liberal ideology of Nehru on the one hand and towards the

Gandhian values on the other. Like Gandhi, she also believes that "... freedom that we shall attain will only be in exact proportion to the inward freedom to which we may have grown at a given moment" (*From Fear Set Free* 6). This early adulation of Gandhi, however, turns into analytical objectivity in her later novels, viz., *Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser Breeds*.

Sahgal also examines the question of Hinduism in her novels. Inheriting liberal outlook towards life from the western education, she does not accept everything at face value, especially religion. Although she has fine understanding of the essential and basic Hinduism of *The Vedanta*, *Upanishads* and *The Gita*, she feels skeptical doubts about the later fanatic and fundamentalist Hindu ideology. In her novels, therefore, Sahgal portrays the characters who are deeply influenced by Hinduism. She reveals : "I have been much pre-occupied with the effects of Hinduism on character in my novels" (*Point of View* 98). In other words, Sahgal is fundamentally a believer of the humanitarianism and instead of supporting any sectarian or communal ideology, she believes in the essential unity of the world community.

Sahgal has written nine novels so far, but in nearly all of them, she has traced the history of India in one way or another. Her technique, however, has been to select one definite period of Indian history; sometimes only a limited span of time. Nevertheless she often touches on the history of India's struggle for freedom and the Raj period. This is veritably found in all her fictional histories.

Sahgal's first published novel, *A Time to be Happy* (1958), deals with the history of India during the first half of the twentieth century. It covers a period of about sixteen years—from around 1932 to 1948. This novel is a fictional enactment of the growth and maturation of a young, westernized and wealthy individual Indian against the backdrop of India's struggle for freedom and the smug non-chalance of the British Indian officers and their wives as well

as their Indian admirers. The novel is set in the narrative of the family saga which has vital link with the Indian national movement for freedom. According to A. V. Krishna Rao, Sahgal's novels "... sum up the saga of India's struggle for freedom and the changes it has brought about in the traditional social set-up in India" (40). *A Time to be Happy* thus depicts the indelible impression it had on countless upper-middle class Indians. At the same time, it also portrays ambivalence in the inter-personal relationships between the British and the Indians. Sahgal shows it by using the point of view of an intermittently omniscient observer, who is a middle-aged bachelor narrating the story with forward and backward leaps in time.

The narrative technique in *A Time to be Happy* takes the reader back and forth not only in regard to the sequence of events but also in interpersonal relationships. The narrator's own story thus fuses with the protagonist's—Sanad's—story. It undulates between the narrator and the protagonist at regular pace. At the same time, the narrative also links up the confused heap of historical details by involving Sanad with the Gandhian movement for freedom. The historical and the personal strands are thus skilfully interwoven.

The novel represents Gandhi in an historical rather than mythical manner. Sahgal aptly records the British officers' cynical attitude to Gandhi. For example, Tom remarks : "He's pledged to non-violence, isn't he?" .... "A few prayers on his part arn't going to do any harm" (*A Time to be Happy* 11). Gandhi's charismatic influence, however, falsifies Tom's smug optimism about the Britishers, when the multitude of Indians joins Gandhi's movement against the Empire. In like manner, Sanad's problem is as much personal as it is historical. Sanad feels that because of the historical forces, he is alienated from his own socio-cultural ambience. He reveals his feeling thus : "My body is in India, but my brain doesn't belong here. I might as well be an Englishman except for the colour of my skin" (*A Time to be Happy* 232). In keeping

with the historical trajectory, Sanad's marriage with Kusum co-incides with India's freedom in 1947. The year 1947 marks a total historical change – the abolition of Zamindari, the partition of India and the communal riots resulting in untold misery to the millions of people, and so on.

*A Time to be Happy* thus attempts to project a nation's consciousness through the fragmented consciousness of an individual. The point of view adopted by the narrator shows historical ambivalence obtaining in the final years of the freedom struggle in India. Through the narrator, Sahgal seems to point out that happiness means liberation at all levels. The action of the novel, accordingly, rounds off with the idea of freedom for both—the nation as well as the individual. As an early Sahgal novel, however, *A Time to be Happy* is part confessional, part autobiographical and therefore expresses a tentative beginning.

If *A Time to be Happy* is the story of Sanad, Sahgal's next novel *This Time of Morning* (1965) may be called the story of Rakesh and Rashmi. The novel is dominated by the political ambience of New Delhi. Almost all characters are high politicians, bureaucrats, artists, journalists, etc. The question of an individual's freedom has yet again been taken up and been posited with the pressures of politics, power and society at large. The novel deals with the political history of India after independence. It relates in detail the Gandhian nationalistic movement for freedom. In fact, it is a re-valuation and re-interpretation of the freedom struggle of Gandhi which is contrasted with the socio-political corruption of free India.

In *This Time of Morning*, Kailash is a staunch Gandhian dedicated to the spirit of individual in the Gandhian tradition. In an interview, Sahgal remarks that he "... was an old Gandhian, a breed that has died out..." (Varalakshmi 15). Instead of the ideal values of Gandhi,

there is an atmosphere of deceit, treachery and betrayal in the political ethos of New Delhi. Rakesh is a young civil servant who bears witness to such politics of opportunism rampant in the corridors of power. The novel is set at the cusp of India's birth of freedom from the colonial yoke. But the country has not yet attained its adequate political stability. In the unscrupulous hunt for power, all criteria of decency and decorum are overthrown. By rabble-rousing slogans, power becomes the only political reality and hence men with vision such as Kailash Vrind, Abdul Rahman and Prakash Shukla seem to be pushed to a corner, while those with a ruthless approach to problems move to the centre of power. This grim reality is quite authentically conveyed by Sahgal.

Furthermore, *This Time of Morning* also describes the growing distance between Dalip and Rashmi. Their relationship is paralleled by Nature and man. Rashmi is struggling hard to gain her liberation from the patriarchal constraints. "While I was struggling with problems of personal emancipation" wrote Sahgal, "My fictional Rashmi...achieved hers, leaving a marriage that had become an emotional wasteland" (*Point of View* 32). Rashmi's bad marriage with Dalip saps her vitality and she is reduced into a "moth trapped in cement" (*This Time of Morning* 36). Rashmi overcomes, however, this state of confusion and uncertainty and achieves a "...stake of definable selfhood" (*This Time of Morning* 55). In this way, the novel presents a feminist tilt in the character of Rashmi. In giving a well-balanced judgment of this novel, K.R.S. Iyenger comments : "*This Time of Morning* is written with much greater ease and sophistication than its predecessor, and it can certainly claim to be one of the best political novels written by an Indian in English" (qtd. in Rao 151).

In her third novel *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), Sahgal dramatically represents the

linguistic bifurcation of the Punjab State twenty years after the first partition based on religion. Vishal Dubey, a young I.A.S. officer, is the protagonist whose point of view remains fairly constant throughout the novel. The well-to-do business tycoons, their high living but low thinking executives and their wives dominate the social scene in the novel. Violence has remained one of the central motifs in Sahgal. In *Storm in Chandigarh*, too, she raises the question of violence pitted against the Gandhian value of non-violence. At inter-personal level, Sahgal shows how violence operates against the women perpetrated by the brutal system of patriarchy. Saroj becomes a victim of such a male-dominated system and therefore her marriage ends into a divorce. The over-all effects of such a violent system also affects the children of Saroj. She learns the value of freedom from Dubey during their lonely walks, however. Dubey observes rightly : "... it was life's precious obligation to rebel... to be free, to choose from the best light..." (*Storm in Chandigarh* 193). In this way Saroj finds Vishal's company peaceful and realizes how truth between people reduces "...the heartbreak and a lot of loneliness of living" (*Storm in Chandigarh* 91). Finally, she agrees to Vishal's approach and admits : "Vishal was right. There was only one way to live, without pretence" (*Storm in Chandigarh* 203).

At political level, on the other hand, the confrontation between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is a little more than mere clash of personalities. For both of them belong to two different and diametrically opposite ideologies. Gyan Singh symbolizes a cult of violence and hence he is a murderer in league with the Devil for money and power. His moral turpitude and political rascality date back to the partition days and continue to shadow his conscience even when he becomes the Chief Minister of the Punjab. Harpal Singh, on the contrary,

belongs to the creed of non-violence and represents Gandhian values. He is a stout-hearted integrationist and thus a political counterfoil to Gyan Singh. Sahgal's adroit handling of the cult of violence in politics and inter-personal relations turns out successfully towards the end of the novel. The storm in Chandigarh blows off when Gyan Singh calls off the strike. This is a change of heart in a violent-tempered man, however. When Harpal Singh is shot and wounded, it is a symbolic gesture of self-purification in the Gandhian tradition. Finally, Vishal too grows up and mellows in his search for the real values of life.

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, moreover, the novelist's awareness of the historical and political developments in Asia and Europe becomes quite manifest. Even though she does not focus on any specific historical event in the narrative, she nevertheless alludes to them indirectly. The one historical event which is continually kept in the background is the partition of India in 1947. Symbolically, the partition assumes a profound significance in the divorce of Saroj and in the linguistic division between the States of Punjab and Haryana.

In her fourth novel, *The Day in Shadow* (1971), Sahgal extends the delineation of crisis from the state to the national level. Of course, she does not lose sight of the crisis obtaining in an individual along with the nation. In terms of the individual, the crisis happens to Simrit, the chief female protagonist in the novel. The nature of this crisis is deeply personal, emotional and even moral, for it affects the lives of Simrit, her children, Raj and Som. Som is her divorced husband and Raj is her lover after the divorce. This situation is paralleled by the national situation in the narrative. Sahgal portrays a delicate and sensitive moment in India's foreign policy which qualitatively alters its international relations. For instance, the old and ailing Minister does not know that the Cabinet has already offered a contract for exploring oil in the Jammu region to the Soviet Union, instead of a neutral country. It is given to understand



that it is "...not in the public interest to disclose all the details when the resources of border region were involved" (*The Day in Shadow* 127). The successor to the old minister is Sumer Singh, who after having failed in the Foreign Service examination, enters into politics and the Ministry. Although he won the election, "...the mastery of facts and figures had however never been in his line" (*The Day in Shadow* 113).

On the other hand, Simrit's husband Som does not give importance to Simrit even in the ordinary decisions of everyday life. Simrit thinks that in India "[W]oman for use had been the rule for too long" (*The Day in Shadow* 38). While dramatizing the growth and maturation of Simrit's individual consciousness, the novelist artistically aligns points and counter-points, forces and counter-forces in both the national and personal matters. Simrit also realizes that "[T]he Hindu Woman traditionally has no rights apart from what her father or husband choose to bestow on her" (*The Day in Shadow* 168). For this reason, S.K. Tikoo believes that *The Day in Shadow* has "...the feminist concern which underlies the social and political criticism contained in this novel" (191). Unlike Som and the lawyer, Raj believes that "...woman angle makes about as much dent as an insect on a laser beam" (*The Day in Shadow* 146).

Apart from this personal crisis of Simrit, Sahgal also shows her keen sense of history through the perceptions of Raj Garg and Ram Krishnan. Ram Krishnan gives a horrific record of the pathetic situation of the partition refugees who had experienced unprecedented trauma and suffering. For these refugees " [T]he past had been dynamited behind them and there was no retreat...but the future was blank too ... " (*The Day in Shadow* 174). In this matter, Sahgal comes closer to Qurratulain Hyder in describing the horror of partition. Raj and Ram Krishnan, however, do not lose their hope and faith. Raj, for example, rightly observes : "[W]hatever rigid choices have to be made elsewhere, ours is the ancient and seasoned

soil of co-existence. It has held its contradictions tenderly, peacefully. This is where swords need never flash for one faith, religious or political. This is the land of Faith" (*The Day in Shadow* 196).

Sahgal has called *The Day in Shadow* as her most "personal" novel, for the autobiographical element glaringly comes to surface here. She herself has experienced that as divorcee, an Indian woman has no social status, much less legal status. The "draconian terms" of the divorce which Simrit is saddled with for life underline the theme of the novel. It is a bold decision on her part to walk out of an incompatible marriage, but ironically she finds herself nailed down to an enormous tax payment. The struggle of a woman trying to establish her own identity apart from her husband and family is unacceptable to society, especially Hindu society. At this juncture, Raj Garg, who is a Christian convert, comes to Simrit's aid and provides her a moral support. Sahgal satirically represents the inability of law courts to translate legal theory into action. On the other hand, the rise of politicians like Sumer Singh, who is inclined towards super-powers for collaboration rather than Non-alignment for self-sufficiency, is also sarcastically portrayed. Sumer Singh is an unscrupulous and profligate politician surrounded by his self-seeking supporters. The apparent ambiguity in the policy of non-alignment and peaceful existence as practised after the death of their author Jawaharlal Nehru, therefore, stands exposed on the day of voting in favour of a particular super-power rather than a neutral country for exploring the sensitive areas of Jammu and Kashmir.

On the contrary, unlike Sumer Singh, Ram Krishnan, who is the spiritual mentor of Raj and a good old friend of his father, is deeply steeped in the Gandhian philosophy and practises and believes in non-violence. Non-violence is a living value for him and it is worth

leaving as a legacy to the posterity. According to Ram Krishnan, peaceful co-existence becomes possible only through the high value of non-violence. This is his motto.

Like in all her other novels, in *The Day in Shadow* too, Sahgal lays stress on a woman's need for the gratification of sexual urge not only within the domain of her married life but even outside it. For example, Sahgal describes Simrit's deeply intimate moments with Raj Garg after having sexual intercourse with him. Sahgal examines the false concept of chastity and the hypocritical attitudes which society adopts towards women. At the same time she also explores the male psychology of possession and control and the insensitivity it leads to in man-woman relationships. Like Simrit, Sahgal's another protagonist Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* is also in love with the idea of "love" but her husband is unable to relate to this romantic need or understand her desire to communicate with him at all levels. On the contrary, Inder uses her pre-marital relationship as a weapon of torture against her. For this reason Saroj also feels a kind of alienation like Simrit. Here Sahgal uses the modernist concept of alienation in the context of her women characters. She employs it to project the questioning of social restrictions and gender roles laid on women by the forces of patriarchal society. The needs of a woman's body, however, are seen at the same level as a man's in Sahgal's fiction.

In her next novel *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977), Sahgal deals with the problems of alienation and frustration of the younger generation of Indians in the context of opportunistic politics pursued in New Delhi. In this novel, Sahgal uses history constructively and idealistically : "[T]here were eras and characters in history in whom public and private issues met and became one" (*A Situation in New Delhi* 161). If Shivraj, the dead Prime Minister, provided an

example for this idea in the past, Devi and her two friends, Usman Ali and Michael Calvert stand up to it in the present. In this novel Sahgal portrays Delhi as torn apart by the failure of political leadership and violent student unrest. Usman Ali, the Vice Chancellor of Delhi University, rightly comments that "[T]he problems on our hands are the problems of change. And nowhere it has been so unwieldy as in education" (*A Situation in New Delhi* 23). The entire novel is a tribute to Sahgal's Mamu -- Nehru. Nehru's ideals and aspirations have been forgotten and therefore the students experience a total vacuum in the absence of leadership. The students are restless and peace has no meaning for them. Only violence can attract the attention of those who matter and the most brilliant of students become Naxalites. The action is seen through the eyes of Michael Calvert who revisits India after the death of its charismatic leader--Shivraj. Politically the decline is total; even the Parliament cannot ensure justice in such a grim situation; while disillusionment is evident in the intelligentsia.

Like in her other novels, in *A Situation in New Delhi*, too, Sahgal places her women characters in conflict with the parochial society and depicts their struggle to pop out of their shells. She shows how women are groomed for subordinate roles and how their personality is conditioned into secondary roles along the sexist lines right from childhood. Though most of Sahgal's women characters possess good educational background, yet they are compelled to pass through the dilemma of stereotyped identity imposed upon them by society. For instance, Madhu is a young and promising student in the Delhi University, but after being raped by a group of students in the Registrar's office, she gets no sympathy either from her parents or from the society and ultimately she chooses to burn herself to death. Through this incident, Sahgal's purpose is not only to depict the hooliganism and disorder in the educational institution, but also that once a woman is stigmatized, she has no place to go. She

becomes the victim of patriarchal violence that is perpetrated against her. Ralph J. Crane argues that "...the trope of violence rather than the trope of non-violence structures India's history, politics and gender relationships" ("Intro." X).

In view of Crane's observation, it may definitely be noticed that Sahgal is interested in analysing the question of violence operating at different levels in the novel. For instance, she has thoroughly treated the rise of the Naxalite movement in the young generation of New Delhi. Sahgal has herself confirmed this : "[T]he whole novel began with my curiosity and interest in the Naxalites who were just then quite a force. This is in 1971 ... when I made a visit to Calcutta" (qtd. in Uma Bannerjee 195). The Naxalite Movement, which was an offshoot of the Maoist movement in China wedded to the extreme form of socialism, thus plays an important role in the narrative framework of *A Situation in New Delhi*. Apart from this, Sahgal is also concerned with examining her country in the light of its political and social changes during the post-war period. She maintains that within the socio-religious frame work of India, the strong divisive influences such as casteism, communalism, the untouchability and linguistic chauvinism operate very powerfully. Through the opinion of Michael Calvert, she remarks that, "Shivraj's successors...have set the clock back dangerously" (*A Situation in New Delhi* 16). For this reason conscientious men like Usman Ali and Calvert believe that "[A] change of this sort here could reverse a whole tide, undo what Shivraj had done, may be his life's work" (*A Situation in New Delhi* 93).

Technically *A Situation in New Delhi* was written as a part of experimentation. Sahgal says that the writing of this novel "...did not begin with a hero or heroine. It began with an episode...then around that I build this book" (qtd. in Bannerjee 200). She simply picks up a bare incident of violence and then starts revisioning the whole history of pre-and post-Nehruvian

era in India. According to D.N.Bandyopadhyay, "...the true significance of the novel may be traced to its carefully designed interrelationship of politics and passion shaped by a movement of teleological perspective" (211). That is to say, when the novel opens, Devi's brother Shivraj is already dead and his relationship with his sister is reported rather than dramatized by a series of reflections – chiefly Devi's and Cahvert's, but sometimes Usman Ali's too. In short, *A Situation in New Delhi* articulates the mood of the nation after Shivraj's death and "...what had died with him..." (*A Situation in New Delhi* 111).

Describing violence in the social fabric of the Indian society, Sahgal points out that its root lies in the political set-up which has been deeply poisoned by the ambitions of power-hungry politicians. According to Ranjana Harish, *A Situation in New Delhi* "...is a novel of political dislocation..." (191). In that way, the novel not only recounts the tale of social relationships, but also the political trajectory of India after the death of Nehru. In fact, the post-Nehruvian era in the political scenario is one of deterioration and decline of the high ideals as envisaged by both Gandhi and Nehru. After winning freedom from the British rule, Indian rulers forget the very essence of what freedom stands for. And this is the reason why both private life and public sector are assaulted ruthlessly and the value of freedom is lost like some chimera. The attack on and curtailment of human freedom has been one of the prominent themes in Sahgal's fiction right from her first novel *A Time to be Happy* until her latest novel *Lesser Breeds*. It is reflected not only in the description of the freedom struggle movement and the struggle of women to achieve personal emancipation but also at political and intellectual levels. This is most overtly expressed in Sahgal's *magnum opus-Rich Like Us* (1985).

Sahgal dedicates *Rich Like Us* to "Indo-British experience and what its sharers have

learned from each other." The action of the novel dates back to the period of India's national Emergency during 1974-'75 when Indira Gandhi was the prime minister of India. Shyamla A. Narayan comments that in contrast to Sahgal's earlier novels, it is in "... *Rich Like Us* and subsequent novels that she makes full artistic use of political events by seeing them in the perspective of India's history" (17). Here Sahgal successfully dovetails the private and the public issues by copious references to the partition of India, Nehru's speech (in Chapter Thirteen), Gandhi's non-violence and his insistence on Truth in direct contrast to the sordid and painful developments during the Emergency. With such historical allusions, Sahgal combines the story of Rose and Sonali - both of whom are the victims of Emergency. Rose is an English wife of Indian husband Ram, while Sonali is an I.A.S. officer in New Delhi. In *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal has deliberately chosen English characters, for her purpose is to show that history is never a one-sided matter, but entails a mixed story of diverse people. Sonali resigns from her position in order not to conform to the corrupt system of political machinery. After severing her connections with her official past, Sonali feels much more human in company with Rose. If Sonali suffers injustice and wrong from the administrative set-up, Rose suffers not only injustice but even death at the hands of fraudulent and corrupt Dev. In comparison with Rose, Sonali's character is three-dimensional because she is at once an observer, participant and narrator of the Emergency and its impact on private lives. She describes the lurid details of a constitutional breakdown and the consequences of an unethical exploitation of political institutions to subvert not only the parliamentary democracy established after a hundred years of the freedom struggle, but also the time-honoured cultural and moral values in inter-personal relationships.

In telling the story of Rose and Sonali, however, Sahgal adopts the technique of

shifting point of view in order to invest the story with a dimension of history. Her knowledge of European and Indian history in fact helps her in elucidating and illustrating the current events in the times of Emergency. Sahgal's attitude towards India's "hoary past" is frankly critical : "[T]he sanctity of hoary tradition had not kept Ram attached to his first wife" (*Rich Like Us* 40). Further, Sahgal also employs the narrative of history to emphasize the degree of degeneration that has set in even among the once respected and effective Gandhians. All the courage that Gandhi had one time instilled in them seems to have evaporated into thin air. For example, the Minister who clears the project of Dev claims : "[A] humble follower of Gandhi was what he still remained though the journey had taken him and the country from Mahatma to Madam" (43). In emphasizing the brutal reality of the Emergency, Sahgal expresses her views about social and political oppression. She suggests that the oppression of women has not changed in the society. Sahgal shows this by comparing the Sati committed by Sonali's great-grandmother to the cold-blooded murder of Rose which is euphemistically labelled as 'suicide'. About Rose's murder no question is asked or answered. On the other hand, the absolute surrender to a 'supreme' authority at first becomes the gateway to success for people like Ravi Kachru, but soon it becomes suffocating and oppressive as he later realizes. For Sonali the only hope in this situation is to draw inspiration from the past and prepare for the future with greater conviction and dedication.

According to Jasbir Jain, "... the thematic explorations of [Sahgal's] earlier work" ... continue in *Rich Like Us*, yet "... they are different in both character portrayal and narrative structure" ("The Novel as Political Biography" 52). Jain argues that in this novel Sahgal has thrust aside the autobiographical element and adopted the biographical approach instead. Here there are no protagonists in the conventional sense; what is depicted as the protagonist is



India—which provides a centre for different points of view to converge on. For example, for a shrewd businessman like Dev "... Emergency is just what we needed... It's going to be very good for business" (*Rich Like Us* 2). But for Sonali it is "...ridiculous Emergency (33). The narrative moves constantly between the past and the present through the consciounesses of both Rose and Sonali. The main part belongs to the story of Rose narrated in the third person, with Sonali's first person narration moving to and from between past and present. From the narrative point of view, although the two strands adopt constrastive techniques, yet both move backwards in time. Sonali's memories of the past and her father's diary allow one to see the idealism nourished by itself. Rose has her own memories of England, of her English friends and her husband's business. Rose's memory raises the question of history and points to the veracity of history in the memory of the people : "... what became of past events and conversations, loving and hating and collections of emotions ? Where was the evidence, except for people's memories, to show that they had happened, and did they get wiped out for ever when people died?" (*Rich Like Us* 127). Rose thinks that she could have answered these questions if she had had some sort of proper education.

On the other hand, M.Kumaraswamy Raju maintains that Sahgal "... structures *Rich Like Us* on mythical pattern using *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabhart*a as undercurrents" (79). Raju argues that "Sati", the main motif of the novel, derives its sustenance and strength from the epical characters of Sita and Draupadi. Sahgal transforms these characters as metaphor for interpreting the characters of Rose, Sonali and others. She has also confessed in her essay "The Virtuous Woman" which deconstructs the myth of virtuous woman imposed on women. Sahgal insists on the need to re-examine and re-interpret the so-called mythical images of women and comments : "[T]hrough the re-writing women do, new Sitas and Savitris

will arise, stripped of false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage. Then at last we will know why they did what they did, and how their lone, remote struggles can help our search for identity and emancipation" (*Point of View* 33). Deeply examined, it becomes clear that Sahgal turns to myth and archetype which recur in almost all her novels. In the words of Viney Kirpal, the story of Rose and Ram "...is a re-writing of *The Ramayana* from a feminist angle" (*Women's Writing* 173). For this reason one finds that the archetypal and mythical patterns surface in the narrative of *Rich Like Us*. Here the point of view of a given character is also used as a narrative strategy which dominates the action of the novel. Represented through different centres of consciousness, the Emergency as a great political event is transformed into a powerful human drama.

Introducing the theme of "Sati" into the story of Rose, Sahgal seems to suggest that it is the story of several Indian widows by extension. In the name of the so-called Sati, many women are murdered. It is not true to say that they commit voluntary suicide. The question raised at this point is—how voluntary are these voluntary deaths? In the novel, therefore, one can see the parallel between the accounts of Sati found in Sonali's father's trunk and the Sati of Rose. In both cases, evidently the deaths are not voluntary, but forced. In her father's diaries Sonali learns how her grand-parents had fought against the atrocious custom and had regarded the British legislation as less than lip sympathy. Of course the crusade took form of writing accounts of women forcibly thrown on to the funeral pyres of their husbands. Rose is put to death by the evil machination of Dev by pushing her into a dead well, but people are wrongly made to believe that she invited the death on herself.

By using such a double perspective in the story of Rose and Sonali, Sahgal attempts to subvert the official version of the Emergency. Sonali comments : "[S]ince June 26th officially

all was well..."(*Rich Like Us* 21). So Sahgal exposes the objectives and the functioning of the Emergency and reveals the strong nexus between politics, business and crime. During the Emergency, the country is shown to be ruled by "one and a half people" and that it is "...a disguised masquerade to prepare the country for family rule" (29), a dictatorship to ensure family succession in a "republic". As a typical representative of the subservient press of the Emergency, one editor says : "Madam had in good faith thought it her constitutional duty to override the constitution" (94) and a lawyer gives his professional opinion that "...the constitution would have to be drastically amended, if not re-written, to give Madam powers to fight disruptive forces and crush the vested interests she had been battling against since infancy" (94). The millenium had arrived disguised as an Emergency headed by a Mother Tsar (94-95) in whose support a number of delegations are going and her big toe is "already worn out with pilgrim kisses" (81). All this is a window-dressing for the repressive police raj let loose on the people. Fifty thousand to hundred thousand people are under detention without trial (77) and "citizens broken on the wheel for remembering their rights" (258). A citizen's hands are cut and he has to be a handless beggar for life (238). The suspicious Rose, as has already been seen, is silenced for ever. Farmers and workers are exploited and the resources of the whole nation are quietly siphoned off for the benefit of a few. There is exploitation galore here. In forced vesectomy camps, even the old and the unmarried are not spared. All this ugly reality is given cosmetic touches. There is "the myth of a rational, human top" (36) quite unaware of the ugly goings-on and an appeal to which can possibly lead to redressal. There is a facade of discipline, punctuality and efficiency accompanied by a hypocritical public and private swearing by the ancient Indian scriptures, myths and ideals.

Furthermore, Sahgal refers to the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes" where the

clever weavers dupe the Emperor into giving them gold to weave him a suit of golden clothes and though no one is able to see the clothes, everyone decides to keep quiet and continue with the pretence of seeing what is in fact non-existent for fear of ridicule: “[So] long as it didn’t touch us, we played along, pretending the Empress’s new clothes were beautiful” (*Rich Like Us* 24). Rose also refers to this story and says: “[S]ounds like the emperor’s new clothes to me... First of all there’s no car and then you nationalize the one there isn’t. And in all these years what you’re saying is there isn’t even a model” (235). Sonali also understands what her father meant when he had warned her: “history would now be revised and re-written. All dictators meddled with history” (*Rich Like Us* 175). By telling the story of the emergency from Sonali’s perspective, Sahgal constantly decenters the specious claims and opportunistic aspirations of its supporter. In setting Sonali’s text against the supportive interpretations of the Emergency --against the speeches of the ministers, the populist slogans coined, the declarations of progress made, the figures of targets achieved--Sahgal resists closure and capture into the official version of history. She seems to suggest that such a form of political rhetoric, though fictitious, is effective because it is received as reality. Sahgal uses the technique of constant intrusion, however, to displace the politician’s narrative and foreground her own meaning of democracy.

Set in 1975, *Rich Like Us* is a fearlessly presented account of the harassment caused to all sections of people during this period. The impingement of politics on the personal lives of most of the characters is portrayed as a brutal farce in the history of India. For instance, a play staged by a young postgraduate student with Marxist leaning uses loud-taped laughter to intrude into the text and to erode the dictator’s claims. In that way the play / literature enables the powerless detainee to deconstruct the power, authority and the lies of dictator:

First of all the dictator's chariot arrives. [T] he chariot turns into a car and then into a jet plane and through all this the dictator is arriving and he steps down to trumpets and fanfare and all the rest, and then instead of a big Heil so-and-so going up, there's long taped laughter, a huge barrage of it, that's all, then silence. Next he/ she - and by the way, one half of the dictator is a he and the other half is a she-this not a sexist play- tells about what he/she is going to do for the people. Politicians are such bullshitters and this one start bullshitting. And after every few sentences when he/she stops for applause, there's this loud hilarious Ha! Ha! Ha! instead. And soon you have everyone bloated with laughter, because every time he/she says 'I shall banish poverty' or 'Watch me remove disparities', there's this colossal raucous cackle. (*Rich Like Us* 211-12)

The tone of *Rich Like Us* is evoked not only through the attitudes of the narrator but also through the deft employment of the irony which is subtle and somber. For instance, Sahgal's account of the minister's speech at the Happyola foundation ceremony is an apt illustration of this skilful use of irony. Such gentle but pointed irony abounds in Sahgal's treatment of contemporary society. It is the hallmark of her style that she sustains this tone throughout the narrative of the novel. What saves the narrative is the fact that irony is mingled with a humour which dissolves the anger and softens the tone.

On the other hand, the narrative of *Rich Like Us* also involves frequent spatial and temporal tapering exercises. For example, London, Lahore and Delhi converge to a one "here" and several historical eras get compressed into "now". Chapters begin with a comment on the present and not long before telescope into a distant past. The linkage, however, is established at the political-ideological level. Structurally the chapter on sati is a digression from the main plot, which is set in the mid-seventies when the emergency was in force.

Nevertheless, like a pebble dropped in a lake, the account of *sati* emits concentrically widening circles of speculation. Sonali tries to make a connection between her grandfather's reflexive outrage and a scene that suddenly surfaces from her subconscious memory – the chance beholding of an individual's protest against the despotic measures of the emergency. In that way Sonali connects the theme of *sati* with the issue of the emergency which serves as a kind of political *sati*. The functional role of the *sati* incident, then, is a genuine exposé of truth. It is a testimony to the fact that historical truth tends to get marginalized and entombed in private chronicles, while published history slants to substantially official propaganda. *Rich Like Us* thus anchors its fictional plot on suspected behind-the-scene operations of the emergency. In this sense, it offers an alternative history by challenging and subverting the official version of history.

Like *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal's next novel *Plans for Departure* (1986) also uses the plot device of juxtaposing the stories of two women—Anna Hansen and Stella Brewster. Just as Sonali tries to reconstruct the story of Rose, Anna also tries to re-create the story of Stella by examining the scant clues and impressions she has left behind. Although Anna is engaged in a quest to uncover the mystery of another woman, her speculations on what went on between Stella and her husband Henry Brewster before her departure from Himapur prove tricky and inaccessible. Anna is not aided by any confessional letters nor does she have the comfort of hindsight, of looking at a bygone time which has achieved the fixed contours of history. Of course, she feels comfortable with the historical past of the Indian subcontinent which she perceives through her reading of Indian history and mythology. Her real problem, however, remains with the unknowability of the present, where she is faced with “riddles that never

seemed to get solved” and “facts as plain as day (that) had dimmed, blurred and disappeared before her very eyes” (*Plans for Departure* 145).

*Plans for Departure* is doubtless a fictionalized history due to its time of action, locale and characters. In this novel Sahgal shows her penchant for realism, historical accuracy and artistic craft and control. The novel dramatizes significant historical developments as well as historical transitions. It re-enacts the drama of socio-cultural change in the British Raj in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The main theme of the novel relates to the transition from the late Victorian to the Edwardian and Georgian periods of British Indian history; to the transformation of the nascent Indian national movement into an irresistible and non-violent force. In short, *Plans for Departure* is a credible fictionalization of the gradual, slow but steady radicalization of the Indian struggle for freedom even as Europe in general and England in particular prepare for the world war-I. It is set in the historical trajectory between 1885 to 1914. This period marks the birth of the Indian National Congress and the gradual decline of the moderates' influence in the Congress. At the same time, the novel also describes the Serbian-Austria conflict culminating in the outbreak of the First World War. In the Indian context, the appointment of Robert Pryor as the Governor of Bombay presidency does not auger well for the future of the Indo-British relations. On the other hand, Nicholas pursues the line of “cautious reform” in order to contain “the dramatic change of mood” in India and writes a note to the British Government about the “urgency of gradual colonial reform”.

*Plans for Departure* is replete with copious references to such well-known nationalist leaders as BalGangadhar Tilak, Motilal Nehru, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Bhagat Singh, Khudiram Bose and Mahatma Gandhi. Tilak is shown as having given unequivocal support to the British during the war, despite his extreme resistance against them. Bhagat Singh and

Khudiram Bose are the revolutionaries who prefer to die in the cause of freedom struggle and therefore Sahgal vividly portrays their capital punishment. Set against such bloody revolutionary cause, Gandhiji's non-violence is perceived as the more acceptable weapon against the empire.

In spite of giving such historical real characters in the novel, Sahgal posits a revisionist approach to history. She looks at the much broader context of the collective and intertwined destinies of individuals as well as nations. Anna is a secretary to a pro-imperialist Indian stooge, Sir Nitin Basu and she gains the best vantage point to observe the events that would finally result in the end of the empire. Here Sahgal gives up the traditional approach and writes the novel more as a political biography rather than a historical document. Sahgal blends the points of view of both Anna and Sir Nitin. Anna is going to marry Nicholas shortly, but suddenly she decides to travel to India and discover her own identity. Anna's character emerges as a symbol for struggle for change and freedom. She gives priority to "... life and freedom first" (*Plans for Departure* 62). She regards her journey to India as a quest and "..... not just the silly wonders I am after. But what other way can I break out and be me" ? (62). Though Anna loves Nicholas, she is unable to submit to a power relationship, however. Jasbir Jain truly makes a point when she says that *Plans for Departure* "... is a narration of history-in-the-making with the advantage of hindsight" ("The Novel as Political Biography" 63). This hindsight is provided by the narrative energy of Anna, for it is her private chronicle which gets heavily interlarded with the political doings of Tilak and other freedom fighters. Anna examines Tilak's activities against the British government in India. Jason, Anna's grand-son-in-law, also provides a hindsight on the significance of the year 1914. Working on a conference paper on Tilak's leadership of the Congress, Jason observes : "nothing could have turned out as it did afterwards if these particular things hadn't happened before" (*Plans for Departure* 144). The governor Pryor



also writes that Tilak has got the Irish disease and that he is hell bent on Home rule. In other words, British officials fear the outbreak of native uprising.

On the other hand, Sahgal also articulates the futility of the warring nations. Anna is an objective and dispassionate viewer of this spectacle. "It is not at all clear to me", says Anna to Henry, "who wants war and who wants peace... why do countries have to be powers, and why do powers have to be great" ? (*Plans for Departure* 129). Having been born "... nine centuries after Denmark gave up raiding, colonizing, and lusting after worlds to conquer" (131), Anna is a firm believer in the jeopardy of power and the significance of "Danish unimportance" (*Plans for Departure* 164). Contrary to this, Anna's fiancé Nicholas points out to her that those who went to India "... had had solid reasons... from sightseeing, and trade to conquest and rule" (*Plans for Departure* 67). Anna's indomitable independence and her sense of freedom, however, provide a striking contrast to Nicholas, the British Empire and the suffocating political situation of 1914. Anna's knowledge of Hinduism and its history is also admirable. She reflects : [T]he struggle for self-mastery was all that was really real. If that was Hinduism in a nutshell... it was a pity it had not stayed grand and simple, in the nut" (*Plans for Departure* 47).

*Plans for Departure*, furthermore, offers a glimpse into the final decades of the Raj when the East-West lines had run from collaboration to collision. Through Anna's character, Sahgal tries to look at India and what happens when a Western female's presence gives rise to Indo-British relationship. Anna is not English, but a Danish woman. By using Danish character, Sahgal achieves a kind of objectivity in that she is impartial to both-native Indians and imperial British. Anna becomes a metaphor for a Western woman in India who tries to see and understand India. Anna's Danish ness is clearly intended to set her apart from the heroines of *A Passage to India* and *The Raj Quartet*. While Adela Quested and Daphne Manners are

inimitably English and intrinsically involved with the powers that be in India, Anna's Danishness is designed to keep her outside the power structure. She herself sees it as a guarantee of her impartiality—equidistant in political terms from both the British and the Indians and therefore capable of understanding both.

Apart from being Danish, Anna is also a feminist and liberated woman and in this sense too unlike other English ladies or Indian memsahibs. Gun Orgun rightly points out that Anna “.... no longer represents the tenuous holds of the West on its former colony” (123). Anna is one of the three major non-Indian characters - Stella and Lulu being the other two. In creating them with their individual worlds, Sahgal has rewritten the women characters of E.M. Forster and Paul Scott and thereby revisioned the history of India in the “Empire writes back” manner. She has also moved away from the narrow limiting confines of a political novel by focusing on the socio-cultural aspects of India. Having created such European characters, perhaps she makes it clear that it is not essential to have Indian woman to lend authenticity and credibility to the narrative. Here she has reversed the role, for it is the Indian woman creating European characters as Paul Scott and E.M. Forster did in the case of Indian characters.

As far as narrative structure is concerned, Sahgal introduces her characters by creating a context into which persons and previous events are subsequently fitted as into a mosaic. After creating such context, Sahgal expands it for her larger thematic ends. The main action in *Plans for Departure*, for example, consists of Anna's stay in Himapur which is worked on a minuscule canvas. In the stuffy place like Himapur, the narrative continually interweaves past and present until the pattern is completed. The background of small Himalayan foothill shrinks progressively to the point of claustrophobia. This narrative technique adequately suits her artistic purpose to re-vision the past. For instance, Anna echoes Sahgal's credo : “[P]resent

truths were so tangled. They yielded almost nothing willingly to one's gaze. It was easier to deal with the distant past and even the distant future" (*Plans for Departure* 54). Jason and Gayatri, on the other hand, provide a symbolic link between not only the past and the present, but also the idealistic intermingling of cultures. Old Anna invites them to visit her in the castle where she now lives : it is a symbol of the confluence of cultures of East and West. If the initial action was dwelling on the collusion of the two cultures, the final action of the novel concludes with the fusion of the two in the persons of Gayatri and Jason.

Structurally *Plans for Departure* uses symbols and symbolic meaning in several other ways, too – through the use of language, Madhav Rao's camera, the use of space and landscape and the correspondence between colonial and feminist positions. In addition, the presence of Tilak signifies change at a political level. By using all these symbols in the texture of the narrative, Sahgal links them to her politico-historical and religio-cultural pre-occupations. In short, each of these works to bring about the meaning of its narrative structure. Madhav Rao has much in common with Anna – both of them are engaged in a quest and their quest-narratives reach out to the past. And both are equally fascinated towards Tilak's political career. They also show keen delight in reading Tulsidas. On the other hand, the suffragette movement corresponds to Anna and her milieu. The suffragette movement is a strong voice against women's oppression. Anna is moved deeply by Emily Davison's death, whose pledge to fight for woman's freedom echoes Anna's own concern. Just as Khudiram Bose's execution is a turning-point in Henry Brewster's life, so also Davison's death becomes the turning point in Anna's life.

As far as Anna's characterization is concerned, *Plans for Departure* "... is clearly a step forward in Sahgal's powerful and convincing portrayal of woman character (Varalakshmi 97). The creation of Anna is the hallmark of Sahgal's art of characterization. Gun Orgun rightly

argues that by introducing a western character, Sahgal has endeavored to subvert the oriental tendency of English authors. In that way, Sahgal's western character "... is the metaphor for seeing and understanding India..." (Orgun 116). Sahgal herself admits of this in an interview: "[I]t is really this, that we are now turning the mirror the other way. We were seeing ourselves through their eyes. Now they can see themselves through our eyes" (Varalakshmi 16-17).

Sahgal's next novel *Mistaken Identity* (1988) is different from her previous novels in point of characterization and narrative technique. For in this novel she has focused on the male character and through him the woman characters are depicted. In addition, she also gives up the old technique of realism which has very little use in the portrayal of her characters. Sahgal continues to show her tendency to re-vision the Indian history, however. Jasbir Jain considers Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, *Plans for Departure* and *Mistaken Identity* as a trilogy in which there "... is a retrieval and a restatement of Indian's past" (*Women's Writing* 153). Indeed, the novel frames its narrative against a turbulent period of Indian's history. It describes the currents and cross-currents engulfing the country and other parts of the world in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

The narrator of *Mistaken Identity* is Bhushan Singh, the love-lorn son of the Raja of Vijaygarh. After a long sojourn abroad in the wake of his tempestuous affair with a Muslim girl, Razia, Bhushan is on his way back home when a cruel case of mistaken identity grips him and lands him in the jail. The narrative shuttles back and forth in time-space as the colourful past of Bhushan hangs tantalizingly in the air and the political events of the day afford a running commentary. As the case of treason against Bhushan drags on in the court, he looks on his cell-mates and the world around them. While the Indian freedom movement is painted with gentle brush, Bhushan's women—Sylla, Razia and Willie May flit in and out of his colourful past.

Sahgal takes a panoramic view of the global events even though she spotlights on India and its landmark movements in history. In 1932, the high court sets him free and Bhushan finds a new meaning in his relationships.

According to Suresh C. Saxena, *Mistaken Identity* "...is a slice of history which captures dramatic political events and dramatic changes in the contours and character of the country at a crucial juncture" (136). The novel is a graphic document indeed of the twilight years and may well serve as a reference-point to several events of the freedom movement. It also provides a glimpse into the world history. The narrative is dotted with significant signposts of the freedom movement. The Lahore conspiracy case is splashed in the fashion of a tabloid headlines : "[C]ase is closed with three hangings...Bhagat Singh and his two close colleagues were executed in Lahore jail yesterday, March, 23 and surreptitiously cremated on the banks of the Sutlej river – Gandhi is out of jail but he could not get the execution stayed" (*Mistaken Identity* 157).

Bhushan's attitude to Gandhi and his philosophy is cynical. He comments sarcastically : "Gandhi makes no sense to me at all. Goes on bleating about Hindu-Muslim love but a Hindu-Muslim marriage would send him on a fifty-day fast" (*Mistaken Identity* 35-36). Sahgal describes Gandhi's salt march to Dandi which had unnerved the government. She also chips in the news of Chandra Sekhar Azad's death at Alfred Park in Allahabad without mentioning his name – "[T]his is where a revolutionary was shot last year in February" (*Mistaken Identity* 177). In like manner, the Khilafat movement is brought alive through Bhushan-Sylla connection. Sylla says that it is a big Hindu-Muslim cause. The context of this movement in India relates to the events in Turkey where the Caliph was got rid of and the religious orders were dissolved. For Sylla's Jumbo (Bhushan), however, the end of the Khilafat and the success of Mustufa Kamal Pasha represents the best model of reform and modernization of Islam. Contrary to

this, Bhushan cannot overcome the fascination Razia and Islam hold for him. He says that “...I’d never been able to resist a woman’s beauty or the culture of Islam” (*Mistaken Identity* 193). Perhaps this is the reason only that after his release from the prison, he marries communist Yusuf Comrade’s pretty daughter.

On the occasion of the Khilafat movement, Jumbo writes a poem for Hindu-Muslim unity. His poem creates a disturbing feeling in the audience because Jumbo sees the parade of pious sentiments as a part of the design to entrench divisions, instead of overcoming them. His plea for Hindu-Muslim unity is to sweep aside dogma and ritual observance, to ditch tradition and move towards a recognition of each other’s humanity. In particular his plea is for the Hindu-Muslim marriage. For the audience this proves to be rather extravagant and provocative, nevertheless Sahgal ideologically approves of Bhushan’s sentiment towards universal brotherhood and the liberation of the individual. Indirectly Sahgal points out that the separation of the religious communities has been a feature of the British policy of “divide-and-rule”. Bhushan’s mother also theorizes that “the British need a Hindu-Muslim riot now and then. No riot, no Raj” (*Mistaken Identity* 92). This is also echoed by Bhushan’s Parsi lawyer Nauzer who says that “[T]he Hindu-Muslim question is a live wire”. But Bhushan retorts vehemently and replies : “Don’t give me that bullshit. People who’ve sat on the same soil together for close to a thousand years grow one fat arse in common and stay put on it” (*Mistaken Identity* 173).

Stylistically *Mistaken Identity* differs from Sahgal’s earlier novels except *A Time to be Happy*, where the narrator is a middle-aged Gandhian. It is also written from the point of view of a male narrator, Bhushan. Sahgal uses this male narrator for a specific purpose, however.

She wants Bhushan to enter into the male world of conspirators, jailors and explore the lives of men living in the early twentieth century. Even the major women characters are seen through the eyes of Bhushan. This does not, however, stunt the development of women characters in any way. On the contrary, it lends a two-dimensional perspective to the rich narrative of the novel. Bhushan is a kind of authorial persona who highlights and condemns those social issues that Sahgal herself strongly feels about.

For instance, female infanticide is one of the several dispassionate accounts in the novel narrated by Bhushan's teacher. When the teacher tries to teach Bhushan about Indian history, he links the female infanticide with the local history of Vijaygarh. He speaks of Bhushan's grand-father who had reared "three whole daughters" (62), when others would have disposed of them at birth. He also speaks of the police inspector who "...was known to have dispatched his three daughters in the pious hope of being blessed with a son". (*Mistaken Identity* 63). He also gives a graphic description of how these unwanted girls were done away with : "[T]here are records of strangling with the umbilical cord. Another popular method was a pill of *bhang*" (63). When Bhushan listens to this, he recalls being told that before him his mother had delivered two still-born girls. Now he begins to doubt the credibility of this version.

The vantage-point of Bhushan's narrative is anchored in a dingy, filthy prison hovel which he shares in company with the committed political activists. Through Bhushan's narrating of these inmates, Sahgal presents a complex world of different ideologies like feudalism, communism, Gandhism and capitalism. Coming himself from a feudal family, Bhushan ends up being a communist and marries the daughter of a hard-core communist-comrade Yusuf. On the other hand, the discourses of capitalism and communism are marked as diametrically opposite to Gandhian philosophy. In the context of Indian struggle for freedom,

communists see Gandhi as "...a comma in the middle of a sentence that could read a hell of a lot faster without it" (*Mistaken Identity* 80). Communism itself, however, is disparaged by the observation of Sahgal when she comments on its ideology: "The comrades India" is going to be forged out of steel, concrete and electricity, glorified by nuts and bolts. Men will make love to machine parts... It seems entirely possible that men and women will turn into machines" (81). In addition, Sahgal also shows her concern about the conflicting ideologies of communalism and liberalism. The Australian critic David Kerr maintains that "...ironic dimension of [*Mistaken Identity*] acts as a counter-weight to the emergence of an ideology" (146). Such a counter weight can be felt in the marriage between Bhushan and Yusuf's daughter on the one hand, and in Bhushan's mother's elopement with Yusuf. By this the novelist seems to suggest that real unity becomes possible only through an emotional bond, because in India the Hindus and the Muslims are eternally entangled with one another. This fact makes clear why Sahgal has chosen the love-story of Bhushan and Razia.

Furthermore, Sahgal describes the British officials who are busy with inventing falsified version of certain facts. She shows how they turn facts topsy-turvy by distorting first and then misinterpreting them. The representatives of the Raj are those people who indulge in literal distortions and misrepresent events by disrupting the continuity between the sign and the signifier. For instance, they misread the title of the book *The Revolt of the Angels*; misrepresent Bhushan's part in a play titled *The Scarlet Letter*; his adolescent romance, his journeys abroad; the publication of a poem in a Russian magazine and so on. In doing so, they construct the "reality" which belies the actual. In this way, by juxtaposing the officially-tailored version of the events with the actual events, Sahgal questions and thereby challenges the validity of such an official version. In giving her value-judgement on the structure of *Mistaken Identity*, Jasbir



Jain says that, among other things, the novel attempts "...to explore the dimensions of the symbolic...and trace the journey of symbolism from the modernist concern for identity and self-expression to a post-modernist portrayal of the elusive and fragmentary nature of reality where-in the symbol rather than be static of a definable referent-becomes a mobile and a fluid referent in order to express multiplicity" ("Structure as Symbol" 125). For this very reason the ending of *Mistaken Identity*, Jain believes, "... is a flight of fantasy, make belief and wishful thinking, the pursuit of a dream, and hence symbolical" ("Goodbye to Realism" 263). Jain points to the fact, however, that by ending her novel in this way, Sahgal has finally said goodbye to realism as a narrative technique.

Finally, in *Lesser Breeds*, her latest novel so far, Sahgal deals with the racial hegemony, wars and the time-less appeal of non-violence. The novel also speaks of the discrimination against 'lesser breeds', the nations of Asia and Africa conquered by Europe. The novel lays stress on the historical fact that anything outside of the so-called master-race (Europeans) is considered as low and lesser breed. Sahgal thus vividly portrays the stance taken by Europeans as the master race in comparison to non-Europeans :

The imperial era I was born into was a stage setting of this kind. Empire itself was no illusion. It was a fact of life, a business-like arrangement that had divided up the globe into rulers and the ruled, masters and slaves [...] mythologising Europe as the centre of the world...gave it the right to conquer and make use of non-Europe for its profit and pleasure. Non-Europe in this scenario was a mixed bag of 'lesser breeds' [...] long overdue for European enlightenment. (*Point of View* 53-54)

Although empires may have folded up, most of humanity are still under their control. For example, the nuclear question is dictated by those who own the big guns. A work of fiction is often a work of fact. Writers invariably tend to fall back on their own experiences, memories and the reflections of the people they know or meet to spin yarns. There is of course an element of imagination that weaves its shadows on the narrative. *Lesser Breeds*, therefore, borrows liberally from what Sahgal saw, heard and felt during the last days of the British raj in India. As one who was part of the country's first family, she had enthralling opportunities to see the freedom movement struggle, and ultimately strangle out of existence an empire. The sun set there all right. *Lesser Breeds*, therefore, begins in the decade that the British finally quit the subcontinent and ends twenty years after the independence.

The title, *Lesser Breeds*, is a phrase that Rudyard Kipling used in his poem 'Recessional' to describe native Indians under the colonial masters : If, drunk with sight of power, we loose / Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe / Such boastings as the Gentiles use / Or lesser breeds without the Law.

They were the lesser breeds, undoubtedly. But Sahgal takes this definition to a greater depth of dismay and despair. She not only talks about the accepted meaning of "lesser breeds" but also points out to the unaccepted definition of the term. It is the discrimination that divided not just the rulers from the ruled, but also Hindus from Muslims. Given this, Sahgal novel is of immense relevance in today's India, where caste and communal prejudices continue to cause anguish, destruction and death. In the larger context, the colour of skin is yet another issue of impregnable walls separating man from man.

*Lesser Breeds* tells the tale of Nurrullah, a twenty-three-year old English teacher, who arrives in the city of Akbarabad. The family that hosts him is involved in the non-violent

resistance against the imperialists and Nurullah finds himself witnessing the contradictions among a people trying to dislodge the Queen. Nurullah is indifferent to such a method of resistance. In fact, he believes that the words like non-violence make his hair stand on end. Akbarabad in the novel sounds like Allahabad, while the grand house seems Anand Bhavan, the Nehru home. Half way through the book, the scene shifts to "An Island called America" where a U.S. diplomat, once posted in India, and his sister try and see how the principles of non-violence can apply to their own lives. Nurullah's student, Shan, lands in America to realise that her complexion makes her an object of fascinated amusement.

Nurullah meets an American researcher, Pete Ryder, who is doing research on Gandhi's non-violence. Pete Ryder wants to gather research materials, mostly orally, from Nurullah who was the witness of intense freedom struggle going on in Akbarabad. He says to Ryder "...I was a bystander...caught in twists and traps of history I had had no hand in shaping" (*Lesser Breeds* 114). Pete Ryder's research, however, makes no sense to Nurullah who believes that Gandhi's non-violence did not win freedom for India. On the contrary, he believes that the violent uprisings in 1942 were important events. For Pete Ryder it was a grave setback to non-violence. Nurullah, however, argues that it was "... a great step forward otherwise if we look at the effect they had on the Raj, which non-violence never did..." (*Lesser Breeds* 215). In addition, Nurullah concludes that the times in which he lived marked the power and glory of Europeans in general and English in particular. It was the world "...made up of Europe and the lesser breeds whom Europe had a right to rule. Armed or unarmed revolt made no difference to that right. Only war and its fortunes drove Europe out" (*Lesser Breeds* 153).

Nurullah teaches English literature to his students and therefore it is clear that he is influenced by the colonial policy of ruling by agreement rather than by force. The first

department of English literature was established by British in Calcutta as a part of their colonial policy so that there would be ease and smoothness in their administration. In fact, teaching of English literature was later on carried out in Oxford and Cambridge after its phenomenal success in India. The main aim in such an educational policy was to make Indians speak, think and dress like them even if they had different skin-colour. As a result, they succeeded in constructing 'Babus' to administer their empire. These Babus were mimic men in every sense of the word. Those who resisted against this and were struggling for freedom were thrown into jails. It is no wonder, hence, when Nurullah comments that "[P]rison...was the only way out of the mimic lives we of non-Europe were assigned" (*Lesser Breeds* 153).

Drawn into the struggle for freedom, the three of Nurullah's students rush to their death, beaten and left to rot like animals because of the poetic fervour of the lines that he taught them. At the grand house, Nurullah meets "Bhai", a heroic figure. "Bhai", however, is none other than Jawaharlal Nehru. Bhai's frequent arrests, disappearances, fierce convictions about "non-violence" and the need to abandon the movement when Mahatma Gandhi realises that his followers have not heeded his call for complete surrender form the narrative flow of the first half of the novel.

In the second half of the novel, on the other hand, Sahgal creates the images of America as a world-dominating nation. Edgar Knox, a journalist, and his sister Leda link the two parts of the novel. Knox is a Louis Fischer-like prototype, a representative of "Liberal", who came to India to watch the freedom movement on the boil as it were and remained there because of Gandhi and his "soul force", the power of Satyagraha. Back in America, Knox is unhappy to learn how America is heading towards the direction of colonial power. Sahgal vividly

describes the scene of the world war II and America's role in the war. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is one of the darkest chapters in the history of America as well as the world. Edgar Knox, therefore, hates watching America "...take up the white man's burden and become the new colonial power" (*Lesser Breeds* 345). Knox is also grieved at how western historical sources have dealt with the memories of Mossadeq of Iran and Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam.

The final narrative of *Lesser Breeds* concludes with the strong trade wind blowing all over the world and sucking the blood of human sacrifice. It is this globalized trade wind that has given rise to terrorism in the world. Terry Eagleton maintains that "... fundamentalism moved into the vacuum which the defeat of the left had created. If the left had been allowed to fulfil its pledge to tackle the global deprivations which breed such bigotry... the World Trade Centre might still be in one piece" (Preface, *Marxism and Literary criticism* ix). *Lesser Breeds* describes the plane crash over the Alps which deals a warning blow of the trade wind of a new order. Nurullah ponders : "The roughest chapter of trade is about to begin. Oil and allied treasure will exact a more terrifying price than pepper, gold and nutmeg, or teak and diamonds ever did. Asia, and who knows, Africa, will be the battlefields of war immemorial" (*Lesser Breeds* 369). In short, beginning with the colourful history of India's struggle for freedom, *Lesser Breeds* rounds off with the trajectory of world's economic history. At the same time it raises the questions of "non-violence" vis-à-vis the violent situation in the contemporary world. Here "non-violence" is represented in all its baffling contradictory aims – its course through a particular moment in history, its claims of being a "power" of change, a weapon even that may or may not have brought down the most repressive empire on the earth.

The above discussion of Sahgal's fiction thus reveals a pattern – that it is mostly made up of her keen interest in the re-visioning and re-writing of the so-called officially tailored

history. This fictional re-visioning includes the different aspects of human dimension. As T.N. Dhar rightly holds the view that “....Sahgal’s novels weave aspects of India’s social, political and cultural history into their narrative framework and subject them to close critical examination” (122). Indeed, like Salman Rushdie, Sahgal also fuses life stories of individuals with the history of the nation. At the same time, she also explores and exposes a politician’s rhetorical narrative overlaid with the hidden ideology that is inimical to the interest and welfare of the people. Consequently her narrative not only questions but also challenges the discourses of the institutions like law, religion and marriage which are manipulated by the patriarchy to silence and stifle the voice of its female half.

Throughout her career as a writer, Sahgal has remained an ardent supporter of human freedom and therefore her concern for women’s liberation surfaces frequently in her fictional narratives. Sahgal’s broad outlook across the sweep of history, her balanced and healthy feminism and the plea for not only political freedom but also for women’s freedom are equally strongly shared by writers like Rushdie, Ghosh, Mistry and Hyder. Viney Kirpal observes that in their novels, “... Rushdie, Sahgal, Tharoor, Ghosh have tried to recuperate and preserve the history of their times by offering their different versions of it” (“The Writer as Historian” 163). Among these writers, in comparison to others, Sahgal comes very close to Rushdie, Ghosh, Mistry and Hyder. In particular, Sahgal’s profound interest in the revisionist history of women brings her much closer to Rushdie whose writing also shows the similar keen insight of history vis-à-vis women’s condition. Rushdie’s revisionist writing, however, differs from Sahgal in that it has multiple versions of history than what is found in Sahgal’s limited scope. The next chapter, therefore, deals in analytical detail with the fictional writing of Rushdie.

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